

NEW

# STORY OF THE EASTERN FRONT

*INSIDE THE TITANIC CLASH  
BETWEEN NAZI GERMANY  
AND THE SOVIET UNION  
THAT DECIDED THE FATE  
OF THE WORLD*



HISTORY  
WAR

Digital  
Edition

FUTURE

SECOND  
EDITION

OPERATION BARBAROSSA



THE BATTLE OF STALINGRAD



THE BLOODY FALL OF BERLIN







# PREPARE FOR BATTLE COMRADE!

In the early hours of 22 June 1941, the men stationed on the outposts lining the Soviet Union's western border performed their usual patrols or manned their positions in the expectation that their shift would pass by peacefully. Germany and the USSR had been allies now for almost two years, ruling over a divided Poland and casting covetous glances at lands elsewhere. Or so Joseph Stalin, undisputed ruler of the Soviet Union, adamantly believed. The sudden eruption of thousands of engines on that fateful midsummer night would shatter his illusion and the lives of countless millions. The war on the Eastern Front had begun.

As 3.8 million troops accompanied by thousands of tanks, planes and horses rushed over the border, the world held its breath as two superpowers descended into a truly savage struggle for their very existence. Cities would fall, civilians were to be slaughtered in their millions, and the seemingly unstoppable Wehrmacht would come within a few miles of seizing the ultimate prize.

Welcome to the bloodiest theatre in the history of war, tomb to endless names, a land of hidden snipers, crushing tanks and colossal battles that decided the course of the most terrible conflict the world has ever seen. This is the story of the courageous men and women who fought it, many of whom paid with their lives in the service of an ideology that permitted no surrender, no forgiveness, and no mercy. Victory was all, and both sides were prepared to unleash hell to secure it.

「 FUTURE 」



# STORY OF THE EASTERN FRONT

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Part of the  
**HISTORY**  
*of*  
**WAR**  
bookazine series



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# INVASION

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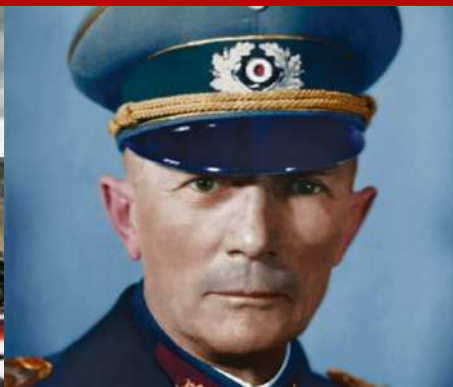
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With Panzer divisions streaming into the motherland, millions of Soviet troops rushed to the front. They would be encircled and annihilated in their thousands







## INVASION

# THE DESTRUCTION OF POLAND

Germany's swift and devastating invasion of Poland ignited a global war that led to over 75 million deaths

WRITTEN BY CHARLES GINGER



Hitler's decision to invade Poland set the world on a course towards a global war of unprecedented savagery that would take six years and millions of deaths to end. The conquest of the Polish state was to be a rapid victory for the Wehrmacht, the first of many stunning triumphs in the first years of WWII. But it was by no means an inevitable step in Germany's efforts to wage the war that Hitler deemed vital to the country's very survival.

Prior to the invasion, Hitler had in fact viewed Poland as a potential ally in a future invasion of the USSR, a war that he had stated was his ultimate desire in *Mein Kampf*. Germany's Führer believed that offering Poland both territorial gains in Ukraine and aid in its own efforts to relocate its persecuted Jewish population in return for supporting a war on Stalin's people would prove to be a very attractive offer. The two nations had even signed a non-aggression pact on 26 January 1934 as Hitler moved quickly to secure the cooperation of Poland. But Hitler had grossly miscalculated.

Following a series of approaches from the Third Reich, Poland's Foreign Minister Jozef Beck rejected Hitler's personal advances on 5 January 1939. Germany's own Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, made another effort to persuade the Poles to back Germany on the 25 January, but he was also rebuffed. Poland's refusal to acquiesce sealed its fate. Hitler resolved to wipe the entire Polish state off the map. In his eyes, Poland had forfeited the right to even exist. Plans to invade Poland (codenamed Case White) had first been drawn up in 1928 by the commander-in-chief of the German army, Werner von Fritsch. These plans were adapted by Generals Gunther Blumentritt and Erich von Manstein and finalised (following Poland's rebuttal) on 15 June 1939. Germany was to invade Poland from three sides. On 1 September 1939, it did just that, but not before Hitler's outrageous claims on radio that Germany was responding to a Polish assault, a flagrant effort to portray the doomed state as the aggressor. This was accompanied by an SS Commando unit attacking a German radio station clad in Polish uniforms and a foiled plan to blow up schools and theatres as 'evidence' of Polish violence.

Hostilities began with the Luftwaffe bombing the town of Wielun, destroying three-quarters of it and killing around 1,200 people. Shortly afterwards, a German battleship opened fire on a Polish military depot in a harbour in Danzig. The main land assault soon followed, with German forces penetrating the borders from the north and west and a combined German-Slovak army invading from the South. The target of this three-pronged attack was Warsaw.

The speed of the German onslaught was astounding, catching the Polish army mid-mobilisation. By 3 September, Hitler's forces reached the Vistula River, 6.2 miles from the German border. Four days later the 30th Infantry Division crossed the river Warthe via German-engineered bridges, and on the same day the 8th Army took the textile city of Lodz.

### RETREAT

The Polish forces were reeling, desperately scrambling to forge a cohesive defence. As they did so, the 4th Panzer Division

## THE CONQUEST OF POLAND

1939

#### THE INVASION BEGINS

Germany begins a brutal invasion of Poland in the early hours, beginning with an aerial assault.

1 SEPTEMBER 1939

#### BATTLE OF WESTERPLATTE

In the first hours of the invasion the German battleship Schleswig-Holstein fires on a Polish military depot.

1 SEPTEMBER 1939

#### THE VISTULA

Within two days of launching their attack the Germans reach the Vistula River, 6.2 miles from the German border.

3 SEPTEMBER 1939

#### BRITAIN AND FRANCE

Britain declares war on Germany in response to its invasion of Poland. France follows suit at 5pm on the same day.

3 SEPTEMBER 1939

#### FALL OF LODZ

The city of Lodz falls to the German 8th Army after the Lodz Army initially repels their advances.

7 SEPTEMBER 1939



## THE DESTRUCTION OF POLAND

approached the outskirts of Warsaw on 8 September, with General Heinz Guderian leading his 3rd Army tanks across the Narew to assault the Bug River line on the 9 September. Warsaw itself was attacked on the same day. It was all Poland could do to engage in a general retreat, abandoning the Polish Corridor and Upper Silesia as it fell back.

A faint ray of hope finally appeared for the Polish forces in the guise of General Tadeusz Kutrzeba's plan to lead a counter-attack. Hemmed in by German forces to the north on the Vistula and the south on the Bzura River, Kutrzeba recognised that his Poznan Army had one advantage: the Germans didn't quite know where his forces were. On the night of 9 September, Kutrzeba's army began its assault from the south of the Bzura, starting the single largest battle of the entire campaign and one that would adopt the river's name. Realising that the 8th Army was inadequately secured by the overstretched 30th Infantry, the wily Polish general had opted to target them. The counter-attack (which also included cavalry) was launched with such ferocity that the Germans were pushed back around 12 miles and approximately 1,500 of their soldiers were killed or wounded, as were around 3,000 prisoners. The 4th Panzer Division was forced to halt its assault on Warsaw in order to come to the aid of the shocked 8th Army. Fortunately for them, the Polish attack rapidly faded, despite them retaking numerous towns.

With the German 10th and 4th armies now converging on the Bzura, along with Army Group South and aircraft from the 4th Air Fleet, the Poles' situation quickly became a precarious one, forcing them to adopt defensive positions. They were soon encircled by the Germans, who began an attack from all sides on 16 September, supported by 800 tanks and the Luftwaffe. While the bulk of the Polish forces were annihilated (an estimated 20,000 died) or surrendered, some did manage to spring the trap and fight their way towards Warsaw. Among their number was Kutrzeba, who managed to reach the capital.

The vanishingly small chance of Poland holding out for any length of time evaporated on the 17th when the USSR

invaded from the east, fulfilling their secret agreement with Nazi Germany. Signed just eight days before Germany had begun its invasion, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (named after the Soviet and German foreign ministers) outlined how Poland would be divided between the two superpowers. Caught between these two military juggernauts, Poland didn't stand a chance.

The Polish Government now realised that fleeing the country was their only option. Its members crossed the Romanian border on the same day as the Soviet assault and established themselves in exile in Paris. The soldiers who had managed to survive the Battle of Bzura surrendered two days later. But their efforts had not been in vain, buying time for the defences of Warsaw to be bolstered.

### SURRENDER

Upon reaching the capital on 22 September, General Kutrzeba set about fighting to defend it for as long as possible, briefly becoming deputy commander of the Warsaw Army. However, his valiant efforts proved futile. The commander of the Warsaw Army, Juliusz Rommel, could see the writing was on the wall and implored his colleague to begin surrender talks with the Germans. On 28 September Kutrzeba signed the official surrender documents. The conquest of Poland was complete. The Polish state was swiftly dismantled by its occupiers, vast swathes of its elite classes massacred almost immediately in an effort to extinguish any threat of them trying to rebuild their nation. The wrath of these ruthless invaders would soon be directed at the rest of Poland, with ghettos established and various atrocities inflicted.

The conquest of Poland had required 62 German divisions and taken a month to complete, resulting in the deaths of around 66,000 Poles and 16,000 Germans. The courage and tenacity displayed by its armies simply could not prevail in the face of the German blitzkrieg ('lightning war'), an attack that resulted in Britain and France declaring war on Hitler's Germany on 3 September, setting the wheels in motion for a bloody global struggle.

## TADEUSZ KUTRZEBA - POLAND'S DEFIANT GENERAL

The man who led the Polish fightback against the German invasion had already experienced the horrors of WWI. The son of a captain of the Imperial Austrian Army, Tadeusz Kutrzeba commanded forces in Sarajevo, as well as seeing action on the Serbian and Russian fronts.

Following the siege of Warsaw in WWII, Kutrzeba was captured by the Germans and spent the rest of the war in various POW camps. Liberated by American forces in April 1945, he was summoned to London and offered the post of defence minister in the exiled Polish Government. He declined, instead heading up a commission that evaluated the Polish Army's campaign of 1939 and the contributions of Polish fighters in the west throughout the war. He would die in London in 1947 at the age of 61.



#### OUTSKIRTS OF WARSAW

The following day the German 4th Panzer Division reaches the perimeters of Warsaw.  
**8 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### TRAPPED

The Germans quickly encircle the Polish defenders and begin to bomb their positions.  
**15-16 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### WHITE FLAG AT BZURA

With thousands of soldiers killed in the fighting, the Polish surrender at Bzura.  
**19 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### VICTORY PARADE

In one of many examples of German-Soviet cooperation, forces from both sides hold a victory parade in the town of Brest-Litovsk.  
**22 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### ANNEXATION

With the conquest of Poland complete, Germany formally annexes the western half of Poland.  
**8 OCTOBER 1939**

#### BATTLE OF BZURA

General Tadeusz Kutrzeba launches a valiant Polish counter-attack, inflicting heavy losses on the shocked German troops.  
**9 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### DIGGING IN

As two German armies approach the Poles dig in to defensive positions and await the onslaught.  
**15 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### SOVIET INVASION

The Red Army sweeps across the border of eastern Poland, fulfilling the Soviet's part of the pact with Germany.  
**17 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### GOVERNMENT-IN-EXILE

With all hope lost, the Polish Government escapes the country, setting up in Paris, France.  
**17 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### SURRENDER

With German ground troops closing in and the Soviets occupying the east of Poland, Warsaw is finally forced to surrender.  
**22 SEPTEMBER 1939**

1940





## INVASION



# AN ALLIANCE WITH THE ENEMY

The Soviet Union was willing to side with anyone in its quest to survive the carnage of WWII

**WRITTEN BY CHARLES GINGER**



ne of the most intriguing threads that ran throughout the course of World War II was the Soviet Union's pragmatic ability to switch its alliances as events unfolded. It was a chameleonesque trait that would dramatically influence the course of the entire conflict.

As with many superpowers, the Soviet Union was born in the blood and ruin of war. In October 1917, Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks toppled the Russian Provisional Government, which had itself formed after the bloody overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II. The result of Lenin's push for power was the formation of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (Russian SFSR) and a merciless civil war that is estimated to have claimed between 7 and 12 million lives.

Following the Red Army's (Bolshevik) victory over the counter-revolutionary forces of the White Army in 1922 (minor battles did continue into 1923), the communists formed the Soviet Union by uniting the Russian, Transcaucasian (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), Ukrainian and Byelorussian republics. An 86.5-million-square-mile state was born, ruling over a population of approximately 160 to 170 million citizens, Josef Stalin, the son of Georgian peasants, its undisputed leader.



## AN ALLIANCE WITH THE ENEMY

During Stalin's ruthless reign the Soviet Union's borders proved to be a contentious issue. The first major dispute occurred in 1935 as the relatively young state clashed with Japanese forces in the Chinese province of Manchuria. Preceded by numerous incidents where both the Soviet and Japanese patrols accidentally (and occasionally intentionally) violated the borders of this occupied region, this was in fact the first occasion in which guns were fired, and it became known as the Halhamiao Incident.

A series of clashes occurred over the following years, culminating in the decisive defeat of Japanese forces at the Battle of Khalkin Gol in September 1939. Under the direction of Georgy Zhukov, the Red Army deployed tactics that would later prove invaluable in the fight against the German invasion. On 13 April 1941, the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact was signed, finally putting an end to a war that was never formally declared by either side.

Even before its eastern borders had been settled, the Soviet Union had turned its gaze westwards to Poland and the mighty German state beyond it. The existence of a Polish state had been a contentious issue for Russia as far back as the Napoleonic era. Despite Hitler openly stating in his book *Mein Kampf* that the living space (Lebensraum) that he believed Germany desperately needed lay in the East and could only be taken by invading the Soviet territories, Stalin could not resist the temptation of discussing the division of Poland with the Nazi Government.

In a sign of the duplicitous nature of his government, the Soviets began secret talks with Germany while holding simultaneous discussions with Britain and France. With military and diplomatic ties between Germany and the USSR all but severed, the deal adopted the guise of an economic agreement. As officials thrashed out its terms (a key one being a German loan of 200 million Reichmarks to the USSR at an interest rate of 4.5 per cent) the French and British delegates arrived in Moscow to talk over the military matters.

### DEVILS' PACT

Fatefully for Poland, the talks fell apart due to Poland's refusal to allow Soviet troops to enter its territory in the event of a German attack. Their rebuttal was based on the very prescient assumption that once the Red Army crossed the border it would never leave. With an impasse reached on 21 August, Stalin decided to act quickly, hoping to conclude dealings with Germany. On 23 August, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed, named after the foreign ministers of both countries, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Molotov.

Its main term dictated that Poland was to be partitioned between the Germans and the Soviets, with the half east of the Vistula River handed to Stalin and Russia. Finland, Latvia, Estonia and Bessarabia were also chosen to enter the Soviet 'sphere of influence'.



On 1 September 1939, the Germans unleashed their vicious invasion of Poland, scything through the defences they encountered in a thrust towards Warsaw. But the Polish did not immediately capitulate, instead regrouping to mount a fierce if ultimately doomed counter-attack. Unaware of the agreement that had already decided their fate, the Polish expected the Red Army to come to their aid. So, when the Soviets fulfilled their side of the bargain by invading Poland from the east on 17 September, they were greeted in some parts of Poland as liberators.

This not unreasonable assumption had resulted in the bulk of the Polish Army (which by this point consisted of around 750,000 men) being sent westwards to confront the Germans. This left approximately 20,000 troops to watch the eastern borders. With reports placing the strength of the Soviet invasion force between 450,000 and 1 million men, it's easy to see why these valiant Polish soldiers never stood a chance.

Both the Germans and the Soviets immediately set about dismantling the apparatus of the Polish state. Intriguingly, the Nazis viewed the Polish as an inferior race that had no right to an independent nation, while the Soviets viewed the nation of Poland as the product of its elite, educated classes. Yet both ideologies resulted in the same outcome: the massacre of Polish nationals.

**Above** *Le Rire* magazine mocked the unholy pact

**Left** The signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939





## INVASION



### PARADE AT BREST-LITOVSK

The German-Soviet military parade in Brest-Litovsk was symbolic for many reasons. First, it was the city in which the Russians had signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk during World War I, ending their participation in the conflict. The terms of the treaty were largely dictated by the Germans and inflicted on the Russians. Holding a joint military parade in this location 19 years later was not a coincidence.

It also provided both sides with an opportunity to show the world that Poland was beyond saving. Holding it six days before the Polish formally surrendered proved that the fate of the occupied territory was already sealed. The ceremony marked the official withdrawal of the German troops to the western half of Poland and the handover of the city and fortress of Brest-Litovsk to the Soviets.

Schooled in efficient killing by the Great Terror of 1937-1938, which was the ruthless purging of Communist Party and government officials, along with the widespread oppression of the peasantry, the NKVD (Soviet secret police) began to remove the intellectual classes (officials, landowners, policemen and army officers). The purpose of this was to eradicate the 'threat' of Polish nationalism. Polish Jews were deported en masse to the Gulags (labour camps) in the frozen Siberian tundra, while executions became a regular occurrence, a prime example of which was the shooting of 21,892 Polish officers in the Katyn Forest and four other locations in April 1940.

Such was the eagerness of the invading forces to cooperate, the Germans and Soviets held a joint parade in Brest-Litovsk, and their troops often met one another in friendly encounters throughout Poland. On one occasion, the Germans even handed a conquered fortress over to their allies.

### WINTER WAR

As the bloodshed continued in this newly occupied territory, a new target emerged for Stalin: Finland. With the territorial and military concessions set out for the Baltic states in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact secured, the Soviets expected Finland to similarly acquiesce. But to Stalin's consternation, the small Scandinavian state remain resolute in its refusal to fold under pressure. When 'negotiations' with the Soviets eventually collapsed on 13 November 1939, the Finns knew they had little time to reinforce the 93-mile-long Mannerheim Line - their key line of defence - named after their commander-in-chief, Carl Mannerheim.

The Soviets based their hastily drawn up invasion plan on a 12-day operation, with the aim of concluding operations by 21 December, Stalin's 60th birthday. Considering that the Finns were massively outnumbered, possessed tsarist-era howitzers, lacked any tanks and only had enough artillery shells for a week of fighting, it's plain to see why the Soviets were so confident. But as is

often the case in any war, this hubris ultimately proved to be unfounded.

When the Soviets crossed the border on 30 November, they encountered ferocious resistance. The main thrust into Finland was conducted by the 7th Army along the Karelia Isthmus. It got off to a horrendous start as the Finns, careful to avoid fighting in the open, exploited the forest terrain to good effect. They also benefitted from having history's most lethal sniper in their ranks, Simo Hayha. In the space of 100 days (before a gunshot wound to the face forced his withdrawal) the man known as 'the White Death' killed 542 Soviet troops.

The Finnish forces held on until early March 1940, despite the mammoth forces ranged against them. The signing of the Moscow Peace Treaty on 12 March put an end to a campaign that had cost the Soviets over 200,000 men. In return, Finland could count the loss of approximately 25,000 dead and territories including the Gulf of Finland Islands.

The shambolic performance of the Red Army had a profound effect on Germany. Unbeknownst to Stalin, it reinforced Hitler's opinion that the Soviet Union was a rotten house that would collapse the moment its front door was kicked in. As swathes of Europe fell to the unstoppable Wehrmacht in 1940, it seemed logical to expect a similar outcome in the Soviet states. Hitler's eastern 'Garden of Eden' appeared more attainable than ever before.

Incredibly, the paranoid mind of Stalin led him to discount numerous warnings of the impending disaster, including those compiled by Richard Sorge, a spy in Tokyo with strong connections to the German embassy. Even the Red Orchestra, a spy network gathering information in the heart of Berlin, couldn't convince Stalin, whose judgement could not have been further off the mark.

On the morning of 22 June 1941, the Germans unleashed hell. Divided into three armies (North, Centre and South) a force of 3.8 million soldiers took the Soviets completely by surprise. Poorly distributed

## THE SOVIET'S DIFFERENT ALLIANCES

#### MOLOTOV-RIBBENTROP PACT SIGNED

Following the collapse of talks with the British and French, the Soviet Union signs its infamous pact with Germany, laying the foundations for the division of Poland and the Baltics.  
**23 AUGUST 1939**

#### GERMAN INVASION OF POLAND

The Germans cross the Polish border and begin their ruthless invasion, sweeping the foundations for the division of Poland and the Baltics.  
**1 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### BATTLE OF KHALKIN GOL

Following years of skirmishes on the Manchurian border, the Red Army conclusively defeats the Japanese at Khalkin Gol, putting an end to hostilities.  
**11 MAY - 15 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### SOVIET INVASION OF POLAND

As outlined in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union invades Poland from the east, killing off hopes that Poland could hold out against invasion.  
**17 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### POLAND SURRENDERS

Despite putting up a valiant fight, the Polish military leadership realise the situation is doomed and finally agree to sign the surrender papers.  
**28 SEPTEMBER 1939**

#### THE WINTER WAR

With the east of Poland and the Baltic states now under its control, the Soviets expect Finland to agree to its terms. But they stand firm, resulting in a Soviet invasion and the Winter War.  
**30 NOVEMBER 1939**

#### FINLAND COMES TO TERMS

Unable to invade the whole of Finland, the Soviets finally convince the exhausted Finns to accept their terms and end hostilities. The Moscow Peace Treaty is signed.  
**13 MARCH 1940**

#### SOVIET-JAPANESE NEUTRALITY PACT

In order to ensure that both sides remain neutral during World War II, the Soviets sign a non-aggression pact with their former enemies. This extinguishes the threat of a Japanese invasion from the east.  
**13 APRIL 1941**



## AN ALLIANCE WITH THE ENEMY

and warned only to shoot in self-defence, the Red Army ranks were paralysed by fear and confusion. General Heinz Guderian's motorised forces exploited the situation, carving up vast tracts of Soviet territory while mowing down the fleeing enemy troops. The genocidal war that Hitler had always wanted had begun.

In the face of this existential threat Stalin had little choice but to turn to the West for help. He quickly signed his empire up to the Allied Coalition alongside Britain and the US (not actively engaged at this point), as well as a host of other countries. For the rest of the war, the Big Three (Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin) would cooperate in the fight against Germany.

Supplies were shipped to the Soviet territories in Atlantic convoys and included tanks, jeeps, weaponry and, most importantly, food. With vital agricultural terrain, including the 'breadbasket' of Ukraine, in German hands, the Soviet population once again faced the very real and harrowing prospect of starvation.

Cooperation between the British and the Soviets would rise to a whole new level on 25 August 1941 with their joint invasion of Iran. The purpose of Operation Countenance was the seizure of Iranian oilfields and ensuring that Allied supply routes in the Persian Corridor were secure. The invasion was deemed necessary by the Allies as they believed the Iranian King Reza Shah harboured sympathies for the Axis cause. By 17 September, the king had been deposed and both strategic objectives had been achieved.

Iran was also the location for the first meeting between the three main Allied leaders. Held at the Soviet embassy in the Iranian capital, the Tehran Conference (28 November to 1 December 1943) concluded with the Western Allies agreeing to open a second front in the war against Germany, something that Stalin had long been calling for.

It seems incredible that the Soviet Union began World War II as a German ally yet concluded it by participating in the destruction of Berlin (not to mention the widescale raping of German women and girls and the



indiscriminate slaughtering of innocent civilians) as part of the Allied powers, having seen vast swathes of its own land decimated by Hitler's forces.

Both prior to and during the conflict, Stalin only ever acted in the interest of the Soviet Union, willingly siding with whomever he felt best served his cause. It is fair to say that his main concern was the extension of Soviet influence, and he had no qualms about inflicting terror upon other sovereign nations or even his own people at times in order to ultimately achieve it. To Stalin, the most catastrophic conflagration in human history came to represent an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the world to his and the USSR's benefit.

Equally, when the snake with whom he'd signed a pact suddenly turned and bit him, he instantly sought the help of former enemies in his efforts to kill it and ensure his own survival and that of the empire he ruled. Of all the key players in WWII, Stalin was the one who managed to manipulate the others most effectively, knowing the influence that he carried on the geopolitical stage.

**Above Berlin's fate was officially decided between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta in February 1945. Unofficially, Churchill had other ideas**

### OPERATION BARBAROSSA

The German invasion of the Soviet Union begins in a blaze of artillery and confusion as the Soviets are taken by surprise. Stalin had refused to believe that Hitler would launch such an attack on them.  
**22 JUNE 1941**

### SOVIETS JOIN ALLIED COALITION

In the face of the Germans' betrayal of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Stalin endorses the Western Allies and signs the Soviet Union into the Allied Coalition ranged against the Axis he formerly allied with.  
**JUNE 1941**

### ALLIED SUPPLIES TO SOVIET UNION

A major factor in the Soviets' ability to keep fighting and feed their people was the aid provided by the West. Under the terms of the Lend-Lease, the US supplied the Soviets, with food, weaponry, vehicles, metals and fuel.  
**1941 ONWARDS**

### ANGLO-SOVIET INVASION OF IRAN

Codenamed Operation Countenance, the British and the Soviets work together to conquer Iran in order to secure the oilfields for the Soviets and secure the Persian Corridor.  
**25 AUGUST – 17 SEPTEMBER 1941**

### BATTLE FOR MOSCOW

Following their crushing defeat in the Vyazma-Bryansk battles, the Soviets are pushed further back towards their capital as the Germans attempt to end the war with a final push on Moscow.  
**OCTOBER 1941**

### OPERATION URANUS

As the fighting rages in and around the city of Stalingrad, the Soviets begin a major offensive against their former allies. The operation ends with the complete encirclement and destruction of the German 6th Army.  
**19 NOVEMBER 1942**

### TEHRAN CONFERENCE

Held in the Soviet embassy in Tehran, the leaders of the 'Big Three' meet for the first time. Stalin implores Roosevelt and Churchill to open a second front against the Germans, a request that they agree to.  
**28 NOVEMBER – 2 DECEMBER 1943**



## INVASION



# OPERATION BARBAROSSA

Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union was Hitler's greatest gamble of WWII and the bloody realisation of his most ambitious dreams

**WRITTEN BY CHARLES GINGER**





## OPERATION BARBAROSSA



In the summer of 1940, with much of Europe crushed beneath the boot of a rampant Wehrmacht, Hitler had every reason to be euphoric. His pact with the Soviet Union, signed in August 1939, had held, enabling his forces to sweep through Poland before surging into Western Europe. By late June of 1940, only the British remained to stand against them, the narrow escape of over 300,000 troops from Dunkirk scarred into the national consciousness. And yet despite a torrent of victories that led Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel to label Hitler as “the greatest warlord in history”, the Führer was not satisfied.

Britain's refusal to acknowledge Germany's triumph and submit to peace talks puzzled Hitler. After all, he had always been open about his desire for peace, going so far as to “appeal to reason” during his annual speech in the Reichstag on 19 July 1940. To Hitler's chagrin, Churchill and the British people remained resolute, leading Hitler to surmise that Britain was pinning its hopes on the Soviet Union. Hitler's delusions led him to reason that only the complete annihilation of the Soviets would force Britain to recognise that her cause was lost.

During a conference with his military commanders at his lair in Berchtesgaden, Bavaria, on 31 July 1940, Hitler outlined his most ambitious plans yet: Germany would invade the Soviet Union the following year. “The sooner Russia is crushed, the better,” he explained. “If we were to start in May 1941, we would have five months to finish the job.”

However, while there were strategic motives behind Hitler's determination to destroy the USSR, arguably the more pressing desires behind Hitler's greatest gamble were of an ideological nature. While the summer of 1940 may have witnessed the germination of an idea that would become Operation Barbarossa, a cataclysmic showdown with ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’ was something that Hitler had first mentioned while writing his book, *Mein Kampf*, in 1924/25.

When discussing the apparently pressing need for Germany to secure Lebensraum (living space) in order to ensure a future in which the nation would have ample space and resources, Hitler was characteristically blunt when outlining his intended targets. “If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her border states.” Describing the Slavs of Russia as “an inferior race”, Hitler warned that “the end of Jewish rule in Russia will also be the end of Russia as a state.”

Hitler viewed the fate of the human race as an endless struggle for resources in a finite space, one that would end, in his twisted view, in the eventual triumph of “inferior” races (namely the Jews) unless a “pure” race was

willing to fight to prevent them. In his primal opinion, “Nature knows no boundaries. She places lifeforms on this globe and then sets them free in a play for power.”

Believing that every evil on Earth could be placed at the feet of Jews, Hitler sought to tear down anything that he perceived as being a Jewish entity or system. Communism, he claimed, was one such policy, and it was this distorted belief that led him to state that it was Germany's duty to defeat the nation that had given communism a home: the Soviet Union.

Unswerving in his confidence that Britain was already beaten and thereby would not present a second front, Hitler directed the German High Command to begin planning the invasion. The operation was to be codenamed Barbarossa (it was originally slated as Fritz), in honour of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, a talented military commander.

Scheduled for 15 May 1941, the operation would see three army groups (North, Centre and South) pouring across the Polish-Soviet border under the respective

**Left A Wehrmacht soldier takes cover during the winter of 1941. Barbarossa cost Germany around 775,000 casualties**

**Below German soldiers attack a Soviet bunker with a Flammenwerfer, which was capable of spitting flames up to 25 metres**





## INVASION



### THE SHADOW OF EVIL

Barbarossa was not just a military operation; it was a race war. The Nazis planned to ethnically cleanse Russia

The Einsatzgruppen (SS death squads) tasked with following the Wehrmacht into the Soviet Union were ruthless in the execution of their primary task: murdering civilians. From Soviet commissars to Jews and Romani, millions of innocent people were shot, hanged or otherwise killed by the prowling SS commandos scouring the lands already scorched by the advancing German army. The predominant method of execution involved lining victims (including women, children and the elderly) along the edge of pits they had been forced to dig themselves, then shooting them in the back of the head or neck. One of the most famous examples of such a mass execution was the Babi Yar massacre of September 1941. Over two days German soldiers and Ukrainian police officers shot 33,771 people in a ravine north of Kiev, many of whom were forced to lie down on the corpses of those who had gone before them.

Aside from Poland, it was the Soviet nations (notably the Baltics) that witnessed the worst atrocities of the war. Estonia, just one of a group of countries that suffered the horrors of Hitler's genocidal war, lost almost 99 per cent of its Jewish population. Within five months of the invasion of the Baltics, Einsatzgruppe A alone had slaughtered nearly 140,000 people. Yet such figures failed to satisfy Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, who in time decided that gassing "undesirables" would be a quicker and cleaner method. By the war's end, Himmler's charges had murdered approximately 1.5 million Jews along the Eastern Front and thousands of Romani.

leadership of Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, Feodor von Bock and Gerd von Runstedt. Von Leeb's forces were tasked with taking the Baltics and Leningrad; Bock's men were to head first to Smolensk and then onto Moscow; and Runstedt was to race to secure the "breadbasket" of Ukraine and the oil-rich Caucasus. Certain of victory, Hitler boasted, "We only have to kick the door in and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down."

While Germany began to make the necessary preparations for Barbarossa, the target of its impending assault sat paralysed. In the wake of Stalin's ruthless purges in the late 1930s, which saw three quarters of the Red Army's leadership executed or imprisoned, the forces of the USSR were woefully short on both morale and efficiency. To compound its already significant problems, Stalin insisted on controlling the placement of his divisions, further hamstringing the Red Army.

Labouring under the false belief that Hitler could only attack the USSR once he had dealt with Britain, Stalin was sure that any invasion was at least a year away. His obstinate refusal to accept the threat massing on his borders was further emboldened in April 1941 when Stalin received a letter from Winston Churchill warning of the Germans' intentions. Instead of heeding the British Prime Minister, Stalin discarded Churchill's correspondence as an Allied attempt to provoke the Soviets into launching a pre-emptive strike against their German allies, thereby opening a new theatre and reducing the pressure on the Allied troops.

Although Stalin's suspicions about Churchill's true motives may be understandable, his dismissal of the warnings of another, closer source were nothing short of catastrophic. In May of 1941, Richard Sorge, a Soviet spy working in Japan, informed Moscow that Germany was indeed planning to attack, information that he had received from none other than Colonel Eugen Ott, the military attache at the German embassy in Tokyo.

Amazingly, even when Sorge provided a date of 20 June 1941 (just two days off the actual launch date of 22 June), Stalin remained implacable, the Soviet ruler insisting that Hitler was not "such an idiot" as to risk a war on two fronts. Less than a month after receiving Sorge's detailed report, Stalin would be proven spectacularly wrong.

A five-week delay due to Hitler's decision to invade Yugoslavia in May 1941 after its pro-Nazi government had been toppled meant Germany was not ready to unleash its eastern campaign until June. Barbarossa was to be a campaign of extermination, with the ruthless removal of the elites and mass starvation employed as a method of subjugating Soviet cities. In fact, the German High Command went so far as to devise a 'Hunger Plan' that would see food taken from the Soviet Union and given to German soldiers and citizens. (According to historian Timothy Snyder, approximately 4.2 million Soviet civilians were starved to death between 1941 and 1944.) No quarter was to be given.

At 3.15am on 22 June, thousands of Luftwaffe engines burst into life to signal the beginning of Barbarossa, the fleet sailing high over the German assault boats bobbing on the River Bug in anticipation. As the planes zeroed in on their targets (airfields lined with neat rows of stationary Soviet planes), thousands of German artillery pieces began to belch flame into the sky. Hitler was finally attacking the entity he loathed the most, and he'd gathered 3.8 million soldiers (including Romanians, Italians and Slovaks) for the job, well-trained men supported by 600,000 vehicles, 3,350 armoured vehicles, 3,000 aircraft and 500,000 horses.

As millions of troops raced into the USSR, their counterparts radioed their superiors demanding to know what to do. Such was the shock of the assault that many border guards were gunned down in their nightwear, their homes and families engulfed in the flames of the







## OPERATION BARBAROSSA



bombardment. Despite this, Stalin was still - inexplicably - wary of some Allied trick and ordered that nothing be done to provoke the Germans, clinging as he was to the idea that Hitler would not have dared to double-cross him.

In all their wildest dreams, the German commanders could never have dared to hope to find their adversaries so woefully off guard. Many of the Soviets' defensive positions lacked the weaponry needed to counter a concentrated Panzer attack, and they could not hope to rely on any aid from above; on the first day of the operation the Soviets lost approximately 1,800 planes to the Luftwaffe's 35.

**Soviet bombers  
soar over Moscow.  
Following horrendous  
losses in the early  
stages of the war, the  
Red Army Air Force  
gradually recovered  
and played a key  
role in offensive  
operations**

Within two days of the start of the attack, many of the 49 German Panzer battalions selected for the invasion were 50 miles inside the USSR. By 28 June over 400,000 Soviet troops were encircled outside of Minsk as the Second Panzer Group, under the command of General Heinz Guderian, linked up with Hermann Hoth's Third Panzer Group.

To the north, General von Leeb was faring just as well, his troops hailed as emancipators by the violently suppressed peoples of the Baltics, many of them actively helping the Germans by attacking a number of Red Army positions. However, the invaders certainly didn't have it all their way.

Army Group South, charged with taking Kiev and then hurrying on to the priceless oil fields of the Caucasus, was finding the going difficult in the face of determined resistance. Rundstedt was doubly unfortunate as he was not only marching on the most heavily defended region of the front lines, but his men were doing so as KV and T-34 tanks (the latter the best all-round tank of the entire war) rolled towards them. While the central and northern thrusts of the German army continued to slice into Soviet territory, Rundstedt found himself increasingly bogged down. His failure to keep up with the rest would ultimately prove fatal for Hitler's hopes of a rapid victory. Yet as July approached, the overall picture from a German perspective seemed unexpectedly rosy.

Upon finally realising that Hitler had betrayed him, Stalin had fallen into a stupor of despair that lasted for over a week. Now, with machinery being evacuated from Ukraine, Stalin finally began to emerge from his trance, and on 3 July he addressed the Soviet people as his "comrades" as he called on them to "selflessly join our patriotic war of liberation against the fascist enslavers".

While the idea the Soviet people were fighting to defend a communist utopia that upheld their rights and shunned the violence so freely used by the Wehrmacht (especially the SS divisions attached to it) is laughable, Stalin was not exaggerating when he referred to the threat of enslavement. From the outset of the war, Hitler had expressed his desire to carve Germany's new eastern territories into a series of states filled with Soviet slaves. A cruel and manipulative tyrant he may have been, but in his speech at the start of July Stalin was, for once, telling his people at least some of the truth.

On the same day that Stalin addressed the nation, German General Franz Halder, Chief of Staff of Army High Command, confided in his diary that it was "no overstatement to say that the Russian campaign has been won in the space of two weeks". In hindsight this statement reeks of hubris, but at the time German confidence was more than justified. By 13 July the German armies had advanced between 186 and 372 miles, incapacitated (either by killing, injuring or capturing) over 589,000 enemy soldiers and obliterated over 6,850 aircraft. The Wehrmacht was edging ever



## INVASION

closer to Moscow, and the First Battle of Smolensk was about to finish with the entrapment of almost 760,000 Soviet troops. A glorious triumph loomed. Then came a High Command directive that would change everything.

On Saturday, 19 July 1941, Hitler issued an order that the Soviet armies trapped around Smolensk (the 16th, 19th and 20th) were to be utterly destroyed before Army Group Centre advanced, not towards Moscow, but south to the outskirts of Kiev to aid Army Group South, which was still 50 miles outside of the Ukrainian capital.

Longing to continue the drive for Moscow, both Halder and von Bock were adamant that the city had to remain their priority, but Hitler was unmoved. And so, on 23 August, Army Group Centre swung south. Three weeks later its southern counterpart started to drive north, and on 16 September two more Soviet armies were annihilated as the pincer closed east of Kiev. Stalin's order that the city be held at all costs had condemned over 700,000 Soviet troops to encirclement.

Still progressing steadily in the north, the forces under the command of von Leeb had sealed off the city of Leningrad eight days prior to the encirclement of Kiev. Hitler had selected the city as a primary target during the planning of Barbarossa, and now his armies (with the support of Finnish troops sent to retake lands lost to the Soviets during the Winter War of 1939-1940) had provided him with the chance to put his hunger plan into action once more. Instead of bombarding the city, its people were to be starved into submission in a siege that would last until January 1944 and claim over 800,000 lives.

Now that the resistance shielding Kiev had been removed, Army Group Centre could once again turn its gaze on Moscow. Despite the panic that had spread throughout the city, Stalin had chosen to stay and invigorate the natives with his presence. He had placed the defence of the city in the hands of General Georgy Zhukov, a formidable figure who had overseen the desperate efforts to counter the Siege of Leningrad.

Zhukov wasted little time in putting the men and women of Moscow to work excavating defensive trenches and anti-tank ditches (nearly 3 million cubic metres of earth was moved by hand). The factories that continued to function (much of the Soviets' industry had been evacuated east) were also turned to military tasks (a clock maker was asked to begin building mine detonators).

**Below Red Army troops, clad in the winter clothing the Germans lacked, storm across a snow-blanketed field**

If the Germans were to take Moscow, Zhukov was determined they would pay dearly for every street.

Codenamed Operation Typhoon, the assault on Moscow began on 2 October 1941. At the outset of the attack the Germans enjoyed a 2:1 superiority in tanks and troops and a 3:1 advantage in aircraft. It seemed that it would only be a matter of time before the Soviet capital fell. But there was one enemy the Germans failed to account for: Mother Nature.

Known as the *rasputitsa* (the time without roads), on 8 October a yearly deluge began, churning the roads into sucking quagmires that dramatically slowed the German advance. By the end of the month the Wehrmacht was still 50 miles from its target. Yet while the rain was a frustration, the freezing temperatures that followed in December were a death sentence.

By 5 December the Germans were forced to halt 19 miles short of Moscow as the conditions froze both men and machines, the lack of proper winter clothing (a result of Hitler's assurances that the campaign would be over in a matter of weeks) condemning thousands to death.

On the same day as the Germans stopped their advance the Soviet armies behind Moscow (carefully husbanded by Zhukov and reinforced by soldiers transferred from Siberia once it had become clear that Japan was not planning to attack the region) were readying to unleash a merciless counteroffensive. Certain that the Red Army was all but beaten, the unfortunate German troops dug in around Moscow did not know what hit them when the Soviets began their attack with a massive bombardment. The moment the guns settled waves of T-34s poured across the frozen earth towards the German positions accompanied by a total force of over 1 million men and a resurgent Red Army Air Force.

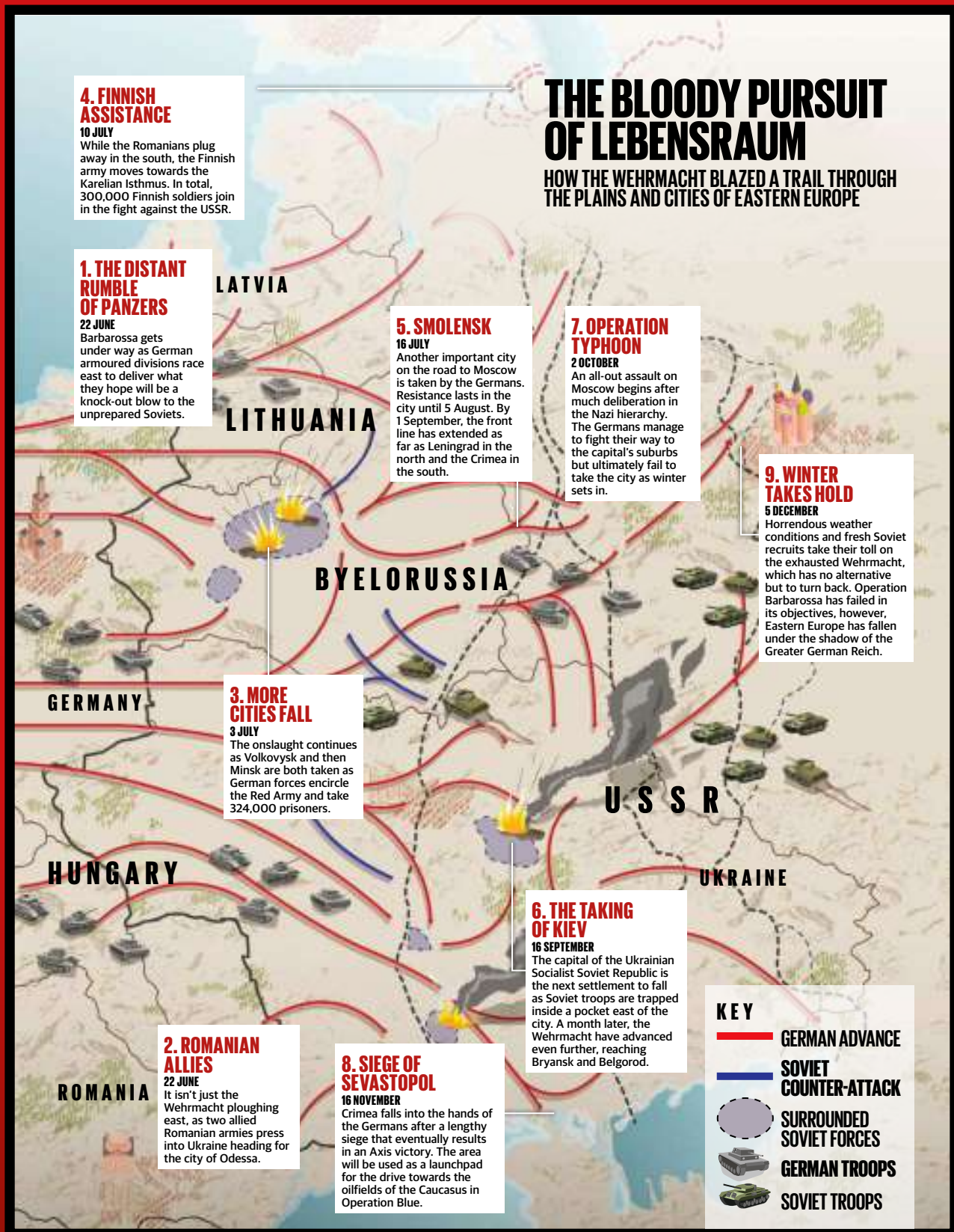
Stunned by the sudden change in fortunes, Hitler demanded that every patch of ground be fought for, and in time the retreating German forces steadied themselves and consolidated their lines, but the threat to Moscow, built over months of fighting, had been eradicated in a matter of days. Now it was the Red Army's turn to advance. It would do so relentlessly, forcing a doomed enemy closer and closer to its homeland, the men and women among its ranks hungry to enact a bloody revenge on the invaders of the motherland. Germany's day of reckoning was now an inevitability.







## OPERATION BARBAROSSA



### 4. FINNISH ASSISTANCE

10 JULY

While the Romanians plug away in the south, the Finnish army moves towards the Karelian Isthmus. In total, 300,000 Finnish soldiers join in the fight against the USSR.

### 1. THE DISTANT RUMBLE OF PANZERS

22 JUNE

Barbarossa gets under way as German armoured divisions race east to deliver what they hope will be a knock-out blow to the unprepared Soviets.

LATVIA

LITHUANIA

### 5. SMOLENSK

16 JULY

Another important city on the road to Moscow is taken by the Germans. Resistance lasts in the city until 5 August. By 1 September, the front line has extended as far as Leningrad in the north and the Crimea in the south.

### 7. OPERATION TYPHOON

2 OCTOBER

An all-out assault on Moscow begins after much deliberation in the Nazi hierarchy. The Germans manage to fight their way to the capital's suburbs but ultimately fail to take the city as winter sets in.

### 9. WINTER TAKES HOLD

5 DECEMBER

Horrendous weather conditions and fresh Soviet recruits take their toll on the exhausted Wehrmacht, which has no alternative but to turn back. Operation Barbarossa has failed in its objectives, however, Eastern Europe has fallen under the shadow of the Greater German Reich.

### 3. MORE CITIES FALL

3 JULY

The onslaught continues as Volkovysk and then Minsk are both taken as German forces encircle the Red Army and take 324,000 prisoners.

GERMANY

BYELORUSSIA

U S S R

HUNGARY

UKRAINE

### 2. ROMANIAN ALLIES

22 JUNE

It isn't just the Wehrmacht ploughing east, as two allied Romanian armies press into Ukraine heading for the city of Odessa.

ROMANIA

### 8. SIEGE OF SEVASTOPOL

16 NOVEMBER

Crimea falls into the hands of the Germans after a lengthy siege that eventually results in an Axis victory. The area will be used as a launchpad for the drive towards the oilfields of the Caucasus in Operation Blue.

### 6. THE TAKING OF KIEV

16 SEPTEMBER

The capital of the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic is the next settlement to fall as Soviet troops are trapped inside a pocket east of the city. A month later, the Wehrmacht have advanced even further, reaching Bryansk and Belgorod.

### KEY

- GERMAN ADVANCE
- SOVIET COUNTER-ATTACK
- SURROUNDED SOVIET FORCES
- GERMAN TROOPS
- SOVIET TROOPS



## INVASION

# HEAD T

**IN 1941 THE GERMAN AND SOVIET ARMIES WERE THE LARGEST IN EUROPE, BUT NEITHER WAS ADEQUATELY PREPARED FOR THE APOCALYPSE OF OPERATION BARBAROSSA. VICTORY WOULD COME DOWN TO SURVIVAL...**

### WEHRMACHT

TIME PERIOD: JUNE–DECEMBER 1941  
LOYALTY: THIRD REICH

### NUMBERS

The Axis invasion force consisted of 3.8 million men in four armies along an 820-mile front, from Finland to Romania. 3.2 million of the troops were German but there were also 300,000 Finns, 250,000 Romanians and 50,000 Slovakian soldiers.

### EQUIPMENT

Arguably the best machine gun in its class, the MG 34 was specifically designed for fluid infantry tactics, with a lighter belt feed and a tripod. The Walter P 38 was a simple yet robust sidearm, as was the Wehrmacht's standard rifle, the bolt-action Karabiner 98k.

### SURVIVABILITY

The Germans expected a short campaign and mostly fought in summer uniforms, so they lacked proper clothing during the winter when the temperature plunged to a record -41 degrees Celsius. Consequently, by 1942, 113,000 Germans had been killed or incapacitated by frostbite.

### LOGISTICAL SUPPORT

The infantry were severely hampered by the Russian winter and short-sighted planning. Guns and the lubricant in engines froze, while basic supplies became severely stretched. Inability to replace damaged vehicles saw over 625,000 horses put into the field.

**TOTAL**





## HEAD TO HEAD

# OVERHEAD

### RED ARMY

TIME PERIOD: JUNE–DECEMBER 1941

LOYALTY: SOVIET UNION

### NUMBERS

In June 1941, the Red Army could muster 5 million men in 303 divisions, but between June and December of the same year it was also able to field an extra 290 divisions from scratch and collected 1.25 million men to defend Moscow.

### EQUIPMENT

Many Soviet weapons were antiquated, including the standard-issue Mosin-Nagant Model rifle, which while reliable was first designed in the 19th century. The DP-28 light machine gun took a long time to change magazines, and even old-fashioned Maxim machine guns were still in use.



### SURVIVABILITY

The Soviets were better prepared for winter warfare than the Germans, with their uniforms consisting of fur clothes of coats and hats along with traditional thick woollen footwear called 'valenki'. They also had skis for travelling over ice.

### LOGISTICAL SUPPORT

Initially, many Soviet units were based in former Polish territories that were quickly overrun. They also lacked sufficient tanks and trucks with spare parts, which resulted in a logistical breakdown. However, an organised retreat and regrouping on home turf reasserted the Soviet war machine.

**TOTAL**







## INVASION

# COMMANDERS OF BARBAROSSA

After the invasion began, military leaders on both sides rose to prominence and also fell from grace



## WALTHER VON BRAUCHITSCH

**YEARS ACTIVE** 1900–1941  
**ALLEGIANCE** Third Reich

**F**ollowing his pivotal role during the Battle of France and the successful invasions of Greece and Yugoslavia, Hitler was quick to promote von Brauchitsch in July 1940. As the director of the Axis ground forces, he was central to Germany's early success prior to Moscow.

In June 1941, when Hitler ordered the systematic invasion of the Soviet Union, von Brauchitsch was one of a handful of high-ranking officials who assisted in refining the original plan and tactics.

His direction of the Axis ground forces helped Germany crush Soviet forces across the USSR, however, Hitler's decision to push all Panzer battalions towards Moscow proved a grave error and von Brauchitsch was soon blamed for the fiasco and pulled from his position of power.

## ALEKSANDR VASILEVSKY

**YEARS ACTIVE** 1915–1918; 1919–1959  
**ALLEGIANCE** Soviet union



An experienced soldier in World War I and in the Civil War, Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Vasilevsky famously worked alongside Georgy Zhukov in the Allied fight against the Axis in the latter years of the war, but he would still play a significant part in the 1941 invasion.

In August 1941, Vasilevsky was appointed Chief of the Operations Directorate of the General Staff and Deputy Chief of the General Staff, positioning him as one of the most powerful military leaders in the Red Army. Two months later, he was transferred to Moscow to help coordinate the defence of the city. He helped organise the three fronts of the city, a job that often kept him working until 4am each day.

A bomb injured Vasilevsky in late October, but he continued to assist overseeing Moscow's defences up until the counter-offensive that drove the Germans out of the city on 6 December.



## GEORGY ZHUKOV

**YEARS ACTIVE** 1915–1917  
**ALLEGIANCE** Soviet union



When Hitler greenlit the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Zhukov was one of the high-ranking Soviet commanders that signed the official military countermeasures to drive out the invaders and restore order to the fringes of the nation. The plan was to take a large force of Soviet armour and infantry and encircle the German force, but despite superior numbers the Soviets were routed by Axis troops.

In August 1941, when the Germans surrounded Kiev and besieged the city, Zhukov had advised Stalin to evacuate the city rather than risk the lives of its inhabitants. Stalin refused, and when the city fell 600,000 men were taken into captivity.

The advice to withdraw from Kiev saw Stalin pull Zhukov from the opening months of the conflict, and he was forced to sit back and watch his nation slowly brought to its knees by a German hammer that crushed Soviet resistance at every encounter. By September, Hitler was directing most of his forces in Russia towards Moscow, and Zhukov was soon sent back in the field to safeguard the city.

Zhukov's impact on the defences of the city was immediate. His decision to recall Soviet forces stationed in the Far East bolstered the resistance effort, with many hailing his tactical direction to get them to the city in record time as a key influence on the siege's eventual outcome. The German attempt to overrun the city was hampered by reinforcements pouring in, and at the end of the year Zhukov organised a counter-attack on 6 December that drove the Germans out of the city.



## COMMANDERS OF BARBAROSSA



### WILHELM RITTER VON LEEB

**YEARS ACTIVE** 1895–1938; 1939–1942

**ALLEGIANCE** Third Reich

**I**n World War I, Wilhelm Josef Franz Ritter von Leeb had carved a respectable career in the German army, receiving the Knight's Cross of the Military Order of Max Joseph in 1916 in honour of his bravery. Von Leeb was famously involved in the dismantling of the Nazi Beer Hall Putsch in 1923, which gave a young Adolf Hitler his first public platform when he was put on trial.

As a result, von Leeb remained one of Hitler's least-favoured commanders when the Nazi Party assumed control of the country – something perpetuated even further by his criticisms of the party's more extreme policies. As such, he was pensioned off in 1938 but was soon recalled in 1939 when the Wehrmacht was in need of experienced officers.

As the commander of Army Group North, von Leeb regained Hitler's confidence with the swift manner in which his forces crushed the Soviets in the opening months of the invasion, eventually surrounding Leningrad entirely. Despite then directly ordering the advance to halt, Hitler soon began criticising von Leeb for a lack of decisiveness. Now utterly exasperated with his leader's interference, von Leeb requested he be relieved of command and Hitler soon complied.



### FEDOR VON BOCK

**YEARS ACTIVE** 1898–1945

**ALLEGIANCE** Third Reich

**M**oritz Albrecht Franz Friedrich Fedor von Bock was a fiery commander who had earned the nickname 'Der Sterber' due to his total devotion to the German army. He believed that dying on the battlefield for the Fatherland was the highest honour a soldier could achieve.

Von Bock entered the German invasion of the Soviet Union as one of Hitler's most-favoured generals. He had a string of successful campaigns and battles under his belt and held enough influence to alter Hitler's invasion plans, opting for a more direct approach to take Moscow swiftly. In the first few months, however, Hitler and von Bock clashed when the Führer ignored the commander's request to ignore pockets of resistance and point the Axis forces at Moscow.

Von Bock was eventually given command of Operation Typhoon, the new plan to take Moscow, and his orders and tactics brought the Germans incredibly close to taking the city. However, a mixture of terrible winter conditions and increasing Soviet resistance led to a retreat from Moscow in December 1941.

### KLIMENT VOROSHILOV

**YEARS ACTIVE** 1917–1941

**ALLEGIANCE** Soviet Union

**A**nother figure with a tumultuous relationship with Stalin, Voroshilov's prominent place among the Soviet Union's highest-ranking officials had been in doubt in the run up to the 1941 invasion. A member of the State Defence Committee, he had overseen Soviet participation in the Winter War, but a string of humiliating defeats had seen his continued presence brought into question.

When Germany began its grand invasion in 1941, he was given command of the Northwestern Direction, commanding several different fronts against the advancing Germans. By September 1941, he was one of the main commanders in control of the Leningrad defences and was commended on his personal bravery, leading a counter-attack against the Germans with nothing more than a pistol to defend himself. However, his tactics were seen as archaic and ineffective against the onslaught of the Axis and he was soon replaced with Georgy Zhukov.



### SEMYON BUDYONNY

**YEARS ACTIVE** 1903–1954

**ALLEGIANCE** Soviet Union

**A** red cossack, a cavalryman and close ally of Stalin, Semyon Mikhailovich Budyonny had already carved himself an illustrious career in the Red Army by the time Hitler ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union. As a passionate soldier, Budyonny had an infamous distaste for the tank and other symbols of modern military hardware, but he was well respected and was promoted to Commander-In-Chief of the Southwestern Direction in 1941.

However, the German advance was relentless in the opening months of the invasion, and the Wehrmacht's tactic of total encirclement (surrounding a city from all sides and bombarding it into submission) led to the bloody battles of Uman and Kiev. When the region eventually fell, 650,000 to 850,000 Soviet soldiers were marched into brutal captivity.

It was an unmitigated disaster for the Soviets and Stalin was quick to blame Budyonny, but ultimately he would avoid any real punishment, remaining one of the USSR's most revered political figures.



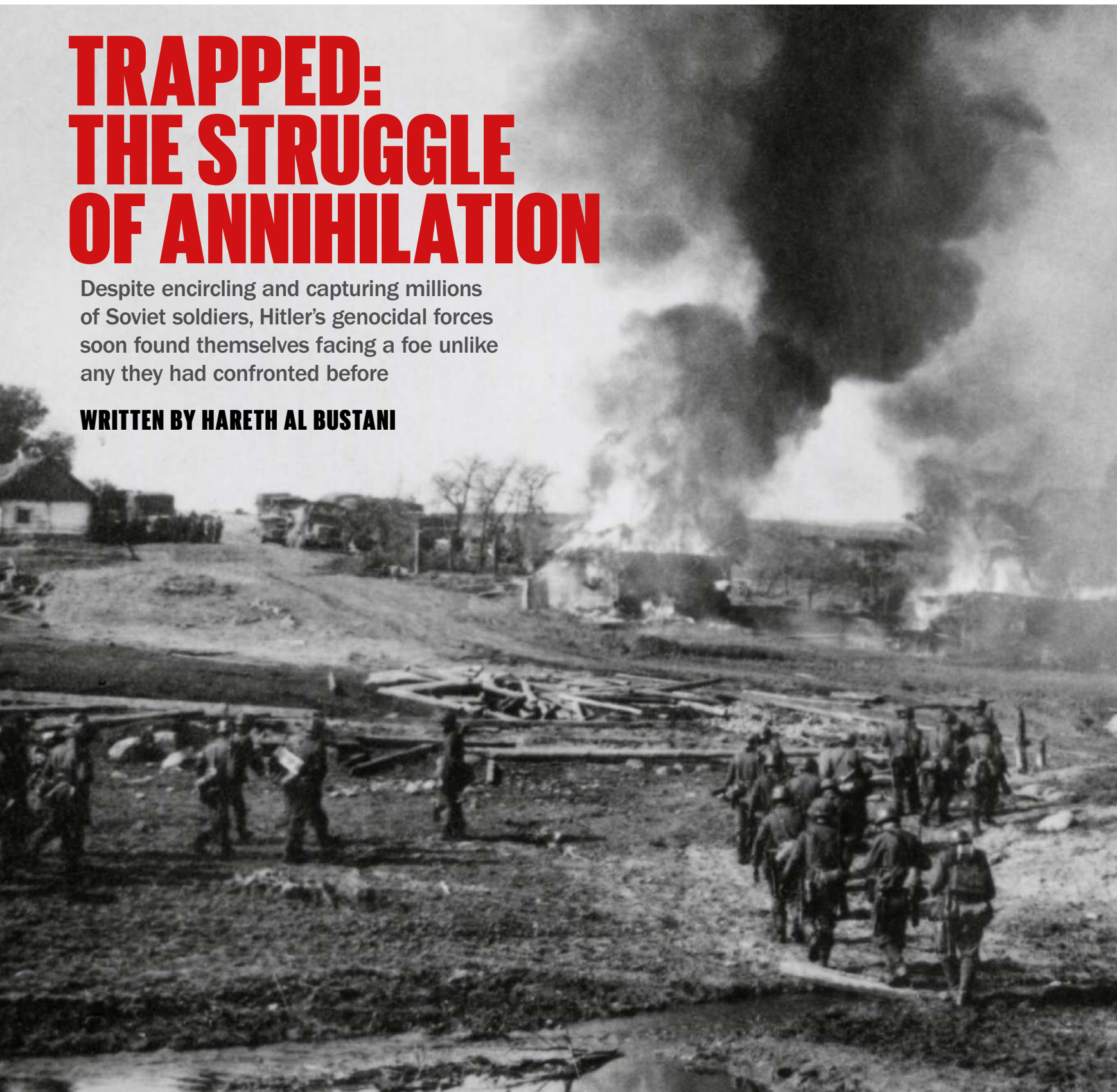


## INVASION

# TRAPPED: THE STRUGGLE OF ANNIHILATION


Despite encircling and capturing millions of Soviet soldiers, Hitler's genocidal forces soon found themselves facing a foe unlike any they had confronted before

**WRITTEN BY HARETH AL BUSTANI**





## TRAPPED: THE STRUGGLE OF ANNIHILATION



Overwhelming the underprepared Soviets, Germany's Panzer divisions outmanoeuvred successive Soviet armies, encircling and capturing millions

**B**

y the time Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, the Wehrmacht was the most powerful war machine of all time. Stalin, on the other hand, had just finished purging most of his military leadership during the Great

Terror, leaving behind a vacuum of talent and experience. Although the Soviets had always made it a priority to remain ready for war with the forces of capitalist imperialism, their tactics and technology were largely obsolete. The Red Army was enormous, with 4.7 million men, but the fervent Stalinist generals who did remain were too terrified to even think about military strategy - Stalin had made it very clear that taking personal initiative was strictly forbidden.

Despite its colossal size, the Red Army was plagued with shortages. Out of the 29 Soviet mechanised corps, only four had more than 75 per cent of their authorised number of tanks, and few of the latest T-34 and KV series were rolled out by the time the Germans invaded. They were instead forced to rely on the light BT series and the T-26, which was rapidly becoming obsolete and almost a third of which required major repairs. The Red Army also had less than half the 836,000 motorised vehicles it needed, and a quarter of these were inoperable.

Despite technically losing the Battle of Britain, Hitler felt invincible. His lightning-fast Panzer divisions - rapid tank squadrons surrounded by mechanised infantry and Luftwaffe dive bombers - had run riot across Europe. Utilising a combination of the classic 'decisive manoeuvre' strategy of trapping enemies within pockets, or salients, and Heinz Guderian's blitzkrieg - punching through the enemy line with a highly concentrated Panzer force - the Germans had mastered the art of industrial warfare.

Crucially, Hitler had also maintained the element of surprise. Through a sustained campaign of misinformation, Germany convinced the Soviets that an invasion would be preceded by negotiations and then an ultimatum. When German soldiers began massing along the Eastern borders, they allowed Soviet planes to observe them building forts to give the Russians the impression the Germans were preparing to defend, rather than expand, the Reich. The campaign not only convinced Western media but Stalin himself, who on 11 June stopped the Red Army from putting its western districts on full combat alert - believing the Nazis were planning to invade the Middle East.

Hitler may have possessed Napoleon's ambition, but he was keen to avoid his folly. Avoiding the bitter Russian winter would be crucial to his success. Although the Luftwaffe had been depleted by the Battle of Britain, Hitler gambled that all the Germans had to do to force a quick Russian surrender was to reach Moscow by winter: "We have only to kick in the front door and the whole rotten Russian edifice will come tumbling down". Unlike Napoleon, who had sent one main thrust towards





## INVASION

### THE CONTINUATION WAR: RELUCTANT ALLIES

Desperate to reclaim territory from the USSR, Finland found a strange bedfellow in Nazi Germany

During the Russian Revolution of 1917, after spending a century as a Russian grand duchy, Finland gained independence. In 1939, Stalin invaded the northern nation once again, and despite unexpectedly stiff resistance by the Finns – who named their petrol bombs ‘Molotov cocktails’ after the Soviet foreign minister – annexed large swathes of the country. The war killed 23,000 Finns and displaced 420,000 more.

When, in August 1940, the Soviets issued further demands, the Finns began negotiating with Nazi Germany. Although he kept them out of the loop, Hitler hoped that helping the Finns reclaim their lost territories would assist his own plans to encircle Leningrad further east. As hostilities broke out, the Soviets bombed Finland on 25 June, and in response 475,000 Finnish soldiers poured across the Lapland border.

Outnumbering their overbearing enemy, they rapidly stormed through Karelia, seizing Viipuri, close to the country's former border. By September the Finns began to push past their historic borders, securing the regions around Lake Ladoga and East Karelia. Pressing on boldly, they took several points on the Maaselkä Isthmus, threatening to cut off the Soviets from the Murmansk railroad, a crucial lifeline for Allied aid.

On 6 December, after pressure from Stalin, Churchill declared war on Finland. However, reluctant to push the Soviets too far, the Finns had already decided to end their offensive stage and stick to the territory they had already reclaimed.



Moscow, Hitler, against the advice of several officers, split his army into three formations, stretched across an enormous front.

In the early hours of 22 June, the Germans finally launched the largest single land operation in history. Joined by 800,000 Italian, Finnish, Romanian, Hungarian, Slovakian and Croatian auxiliaries, 3 million German soldiers hurtled eastwards. With a collective 3,580 tanks, 7,184 artillery pieces, 2,740 aeroplanes, 600,000 motorised vehicles and 750,000 horses, it was the largest concentrated military force the world had ever seen.

The Luftwaffe kicked off the campaign by wiping out more than 1,200 Soviet planes in the first morning alone. Mirroring the invasion of Poland, the Germans drove huge wedges of rapid Panzer tanks across the border before sealing pincer movements around massive salients of Russian soldiers, creating enormous battles of encirclement. Far ahead, German agents had already begun cutting telephone lines, sabotaging headquarters and securing bridges.

To the rear trailed Heinrich Himmler's Einsatzgruppen – death squads ordered to exterminate the Jewish-Bolshevik intelligentsia. They trawled through conquered cities, towns and villages, rounding up and murdering all Jews, gypsies, intelligentsia and political commissars. Earlier that year, while speaking to 250 high-ranking officers, Hitler had made it very clear this would be no ordinary war: “What is involved is a struggle of annihilation... The fight will be very different from the fight in the West. In the East harshness is kindness toward the future.”

Although the SS had already terrorised Poland, this would be the ultimate manifestation of his racist ideology.

While the main German strike force (Field Marshal Fedor von Bock's Army Group Centre) was destined for Moscow, further north Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb led Army Group North across the River Nemen, beginning a 525-mile advance towards the heartland of the Soviet revolution, Leningrad. Reflecting the chaos in its ranks, Red Army resistance was scattered – fierce in some regions while non-existent in others.

However, the Soviets were quite unlike the enemies Germany had encountered in the West. Ordered to stand their ground, they refused to retreat. No matter how many died, endless waves of suicidal soldiers hurled themselves into the fiery crush of the Panzers. Inflicting considerable casualties of their own, even after being encircled, they only surrendered when they had finally run out of fuel, ammunition, medical supplies and food. In Lithuania,



**“THE LUFTWAFFE KICKED OFF THE CAMPAIGN BY WIPING OUT MORE THAN 1,200 SOVIET PLANES IN THE FIRST MORNING ALONE”**

von Leeb's Panzers fought for days in an enormous tank battle against the Soviet Mechanised Corps. It was here they first encountered the Soviets' new KV series of tanks, one of which was alleged to have held up the 6th Panzer Division alone for an entire day.

Mounting a last-stand defence at Raseiniai, the Soviets' 2nd Tank Division overwhelmed the German 114th Motorised Infantry Regiment, steamrolling its vehicles and mutilating wounded and captured Germans. Hoping to reduce vulnerability to the Luftwaffe, the Soviets spread their mechanised formations into small columns. However, when the 6th Panzer arrived to relieve the 1st Panzer, the two quickly encircled the Russians, destroying 704 of their 749 tanks.

Meanwhile, in the south, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South faced the daunting march towards Kiev. Their job was to seize the agricultural and industrial regions of Ukraine and the coal-rich Donets



## TRAPPED: THE STRUGGLE OF ANNIHILATION



Basin, cutting the Soviets off from the Caucasus oil fields. Believing any German attack would be concentrated in the south, this is where Stalin distributed his advanced Mechanised Corps most heavily.

Repeatedly outmanoeuvred, the Red Army's unsuspecting soldiers were utterly overwhelmed. At the Belorussian capital of Minsk, the Germans encircled two entire armies, capturing a force roughly as large as the British Expeditionary Force that had escaped Dunkirk. By the end of June, Stalin was so shocked and demoralised by the pace of the Germans' bloody rampage that at a meeting at the Commissariat for Defence he drove General Zhukov to tears before retreating to a country residence, lamenting the demise of the state Lenin founded. In just a matter of weeks, 341,012 Soviets had been killed or gone missing, with a further 76,717 sick or wounded and 600,000 captured. Most of these prisoners would soon starve to death. Alongside them, the Germans had

**Despite heavy Soviet resistance, the Wehrmacht utterly overwhelmed the inexperienced Red Army, devastated by Stalin's recent purges**



also seized 4,799 tanks, 9,427 guns and mortars and 1,177 planes. When the senior Politburo members came to propose the creation of a war cabinet, Stalin initially thought they had come to arrest him. Instead he was made commander-in-chief.

By 11 July, Franz Halder began to believe "the campaign against Russia" had been "won within two weeks". The Soviets were worried. Desperate to deflect, Stalin executed generals, such as the Western Front commander Dmitry Pavlov, deemed responsible for Soviet failures. Yet despite their gains the Germans were pursuing a high-risk strategy - Hitler banked on being able to exploit the USSR's infrastructure and raw materials. The Soviets, meanwhile, were determined to leave nothing to their attackers - deserting their cities, burning down their crops and destroying roads, bridges and trains. Remarkably, entire munitions plants and factories were disassembled, sent eastwards and rebuilt in the Urals and Siberia.





## INVASION

Army Group Centre's initial advance through Belarus was slowed by heavy resistance, but at the end of the month its Panzer units sealed a series of enormous double envelopments around four Soviet armies in the Bialystok-Minsk pockets, capturing 320,000 soldiers. Loosely following Napoleon's route, von Bock's two Panzer units raced forward, overtaking the Soviets on the far side of Smolensk on 27 July, sealing yet another pincer attack on two more armies and taking a further 300,000 captives.

In the south, von Rundstedt pushed the Soviets through Ukraine, beyond the defensive Stalin Line. Despite being slowed by Soviet flanking attacks, on 8 August he successfully surrounded two Soviet armies in the Uman pocket - taking 100,000 prisoners - before crossing the Dnieper River and besieging the Black Sea naval port of Odessa.

For all his successes, it soon became apparent that Hitler's optimism had been overblown. While the Germans estimated that the Soviets only had 50 reserve divisions, Stalin was able to raise 200 more. Despite capturing massive hordes of men and equipment, the Soviets seemed to just keep on coming. Realising the apocalyptic nature of Hitler's campaign, their resistance increased with every battle, and the land itself was beginning to fight back, drawing the Germans deeper into increasingly treacherous battlefields. The Germans were reaching the limits of production, only able to manufacture a third of the required 600 tanks a month, and fuel reserves were dwindling fast.

Desperate for a swift resolution before winter, High Command wanted to concentrate their forces for a full-on attack on Moscow - now just 220 miles away - and capture it as quickly as possible. This is where, they estimated, the Soviets would make their last stand. Blitzkrieg required the Germans to wipe out the full mass of the Soviet army in one fell swoop. Hitler, however, wanted to cut off the Soviets' access to the Baltic with an attack in the north, and simultaneously advance across a broad front in the south. As they protested, the Führer repeatedly complained, "My generals know nothing about a war economy." The standoff ended with Hitler ordering Army Group Centre to send motorised formations to the commanders in the north and south. Decrying the move as "outrageous" and "unacceptable", Halder suggested he and Walther von Brauchitsch hand in a joint resignation, but the commander-in-chief declined.

Like the Germans, the Soviets also suffered from a dictator with too much say in the decision-making process. Still underestimating the speed of Germany's Panzers approaching the enormous Kiev salient, Stalin ordered the Southwest Front to stay and hold their ground. On 14 September, Heinz Guderian approached from the north as Paul Ludwig Ewald von Kleist came from the south, sealing the largest-ever encirclement and forming a triangle, each side 30 miles long. The Wehrmacht carved up the battlefield into small segments,



**Above** A column of German troops halt on a wooded road outside of Moscow, 1941

increasingly clamping tighter around the city itself, where loudspeakers blasted Stalin speeches in a desperate attempt to motivate the defenders.

On 24 September, with the Germans in control of the city, the Soviets set off a series of explosions by remote control, engulfing the attackers in flames. The Germans used the fire as an excuse to murder 33,771 Jews in the ravine of Babi Yar - their worst massacre to date. The victory only served to reinforce Hitler's perception of his own genius, nullifying the greater flanking threat and carving out a huge path to Moscow. However, by continuing to carry out northern and southern escapades he was increasingly driving his armies further apart.

By the end of September the Red Army had sustained 2.5 million casualties, and Hitler was preparing for a final push on Moscow. Having taken 665,000 prisoners





## TRAPPED: THE STRUGGLE OF ANNIHILATION



at Kiev, Guderian's Panzers headed back north to rejoin Army Group Centre. Meanwhile, having finally reached Leningrad, Army Group North sent the 4th Panzer Army south to join the assault.

In October, an increasingly desperate Stalin offered Hitler the Baltic, Belorussia, Moldavia and part of the Ukraine in return for peace. The Führer instead launched Operation Typhoon - one last push to seize the beleaguered Russian capital. As the assault on Moscow began, Hitler gave a speech in the Berlin Sportpalast, denouncing his enemies as "animals and beasts" who were "already broken and will never rise again". If any surrender was offered, his men were ordered to refuse it. Moscow would be starved, razed to the ground and buried beneath a massive reservoir - lost without a trace. Little did he know, the war had only just begun.

### THE ENCIRCLEMENT OF LENINGRAD

Trapped between the Finns and Army Group North, the birthplace of the Russian Revolution was quickly surrounded

As the birthplace of the Russian Revolution, Leningrad was a natural target for Hitler. He was so fixated on the city that he insisted it be conquered before Army Group Centre took Moscow. The task of taking the city fell to Army Group North, led by Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb.

Although von Leeb's Panzers stormed across the Baltic with ferocious speed, crossing 500 miles in just three weeks, on 14 July Hitler ordered them to halt to allow the infantry to catch up. Despite losing precious time, the Führer dragged the 3rd Panzer Group up from Army Group Central to give von Leeb the flexibility needed to secure a double envelopment around Leningrad. In August he told von Leeb to swing east and link up with the Finnish Army, who had the Soviets tied up near Lake Ladoga to the north.

After completing the occupation of Estonia, Army Group North approached the western outskirts of Leningrad. The pincer was finally snapped shut when the XXXIX Panzer Corps swooped up and around the eastern side of Leningrad to take Schlüsselburg at the head of the Neva River, cutting off all communication and supply routes to the city. Although the assault on the city began on 9 September, just one week later Hitler sent the 4th Panzer Group to Army Group Centre for the attack on Moscow, and the Germans decided to bombard, besiege and starve Leningrad into submission.



As the birthplace of the Russian Revolution, Leningrad was a powerful symbolic target



## INVASION

# ANATOMY OF THE STURMPANZER I

**THIS SELF-PROPELLED GUN SURVIVED THE BATTLE OF FRANCE AND THE INVASION OF GREECE, BUT ITS SWAN-SONG WOULD COME IN THE BITTER FIGHTING ON THE EASTERN FRONT**

### SELF-PROPELLED GUN

Despite being collectively grouped into the 'tank' family, the Sturmpanzer I was actually a mobile armoured cannon. The idea was to create a mobile platform that combined the armour of a tank with a powerful main gun to support infantry in the field.

**FRONT ARMOUR WAS 13MM THICK**

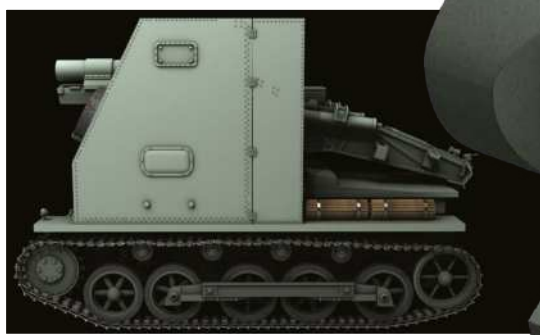
**THE STURMPANZER I HAD A FIRE RATE OF THREE ROUNDS PER MINUTE**

### HEAVY WEAPONRY

The formidable Panzer IV may have been more of an all-round war vehicle - thus forming the core of the Germans' mobile artillery - but the Sturmpanzer had a far more powerful and destructive main armament, the sIG 33, which fired huge 15cm shells.

### A RARE SIGHT

Produced in February 1940, the original Sturmpanzer had a smaller run, at only 38 individual units. These units were split among a number of different battalions, including six Panzer divisions during the Battle of France.







## ANATOMY OF THE STURMPANZER I

### FIRING HIGH

The Sturmpanzer I may have been compact, but its design inexplicably placed the cannon much higher than other armoured vehicles, meaning the gunner often had to compensate while aiming in battle. This proved to be one of the Sturmpanzer I's biggest problems.

### NO SECONDARY FIRE

Later versions of the Sturmpanzer would utilise a secondary weapon in the form of the meaty MG 34, but the first incarnation had no other weapons save the sIG 33 cannon, which was re-appropriated for the vehicle design of the Sturmpanzer I.

### BATTLE-HARDENED

Despite its many technical faults, the Bison saw action across multiple battlefields in World War II. It was involved in the bloody Battle of France in 1940, the invasion of the Balkans in Operation Marita, and Operation Barbarossa in 1941.

WEIGHED 8.5 TONS

### NO ROOM FOR AMMUNITION

The original version of the Sturmpanzer was smaller than the incarnations that would follow in later generations, and with little to no space inside the vehicle, extra ammunition was carried behind it in a separate vehicle.

## ARMoured WARFARE ON THE STREETS

Serious overloading of the chassis meant that the Sturmpanzer wasn't designed for off-road warfare. As the many accounts of these armoured vehicles breaking down in rural areas (especially in wet weather) should testify, the Sturmpanzer was a mobile cannon that Hitler wanted used for urban assaults.

Its rounds were powerful enough to blow straight through walls, so the Germans often used them to clear out Allied roadblocks. However, while these mobile cannons often cleared obstacles or destroyed gun nests, they also attracted the most fire, so the German infantry would often hold back until the vehicle had cleared the vicinity before engaging.

### NEED FOR SPEED

The original Sturmpanzer was designed specifically to work in urban environments, and its six-cylinder, water-cooled Maybach NL38TR engine could produce up to 25mph. This made it as fast as a Panzer IV, but unlike its big brother, the Sturmpanzer I struggled off-road.

### EXPOSED CREW

The basic crew of a Sturmpanzer I consisted of four or five men, but only three could fit inside the small armoured compartment of the vehicle. For the rest of the crew left to load the cannon, that meant being exposed out in the open during battle.



Illustration: Alex Pang [www.alexpangillustration.com](http://www.alexpangillustration.com)



**INVASION**

# AT THE GATES OF MOSCOW

The ambitious assault aimed at capturing the prize of the Soviet Union

**WRITTEN BY JAMES HORTON**







## AT THE GATES OF MOSCOW



"We will, without fail, hold Moscow." Marshal Georgy Zhukov was resolute in the autumn of 1941 when asked by the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, if they could realistically defend the Soviet capital. Zhukov's adamant reply may have come as a comfort to Stalin, but it may have also been a surprising one, as the Soviet situation looked dire. Since June of that year the Soviet Union had lost vast swathes of territory, suffering crushing defeat after crushing defeat following a surprise invasion by Nazi Germany. By the beginning of October the Germans'

eastern army, the Ostheer, had once again set its sights on Moscow and devised a plan of conquest under the moniker Operation Typhoon. Army Group Centre - the division of the Ostheer tasked with driving straight at the heart of Soviet Russia - had secured its flanks and was on the march.

Operation Typhoon began with yet more savage successes for the Germans. The month opened with protracted battles near Vyazma and the Bryansk Oblast, which stood between the Germans and their ultimate target. The commander of Army Group Centre, Fedor von Bock, achieved success in part thanks to the arrival

*The Battle of  
Moscow 1941  
by Evgeny  
Ivanovich  
Danilevsky*







## INVASION

**Right** The October Revolution parade went ahead in 1941 despite the looming German threat

**Below** Although they began the defensive at a numerical disadvantage, the Soviets quickly replenished their ranks



of the 2nd Panzer Army, which outflanked the Soviets. The Red Army soldiers were enveloped, but continued to fight bitterly until mid-October, doing their part for the war effort by slowing the German advance to their capital. The commander of the 2nd Panzer Army, Heinz Guderian, had played instrumental roles in the invasions of Poland and France and had recently helped the Ostheer capture Kiev. He had returned to Army Group Centre at less than full strength but buoyed by confidence of an impending German victory. The capture of Moscow was to be conducted by means of a pincer attack, with Guderian's forces attacking from the south via Tula, Panzer commanders Georg-Hans Reinhardt and Erich Hoepner leading forces from the north, and the rest of Bock's forces progressing from the centre. At the beginning of the advance on Moscow the central battle line stretched for over 435 miles and consisted of nearly 2 million German soldiers.

Bock's forces followed up on their success by dislodging Soviet resistance stationed at key points en route to Moscow that composed the Mozhaisk Defensive Line, which included Volokolamsk, Mozhaisk, Maloyaroslavets and Kaluga. Yet despite these military victories the advance would soon be slowed - then stalled - by an underestimated obstacle: Russian weather. Nazi command was acutely aware of the harsh Russian winter that scuppered Napoleon's campaign in 1812, and as such their invasion was characteristically aimed at achieving a quick resolution. Despite this, Hitler had ordered that Army Group Centre pause their advance during the previous month, as Army Group's North and South had not made as much ground. The result was that



## AT THE GATES OF MOSCOW

the German front line, which stretched for well over 932 miles, bulged at its centre in an easterly direction, leaving the centre exposed at its flanks. German high command knew that their objectives must be attained by winter if they were to have any chance of success, yet Hitler peeled forces away from Bock to fight elsewhere. By the time the German line had realigned it was nearly October, meaning that from its inception Operation Typhoon was a race against time.

Although the Germans were aware of the impending bitter cold, they didn't consider the challenges the Russian autumn would set upon them. During spring and autumn, periods of heavy rainfall and melted snow known as 'rasputitsa' drowned and bogged down country roads, rendering them inaccessible to German vehicles. The toll was even worse on the infantry, who had to wade through the quagmire in filthy uniforms that weren't being replaced. All the while during this advance the Germans endured repeated bombardments and infantry assaults from pockets of Soviet soldiers. Some divisions had been depleted so badly from these efforts they had a mere 25 per cent of their effective fighting force remaining. This was the beginning of a severe strain on the men, which was only set to get worse over the coming months.

By the end of October, traversing the terrain was becoming so difficult that the decision was made to pause the advance until the first winter frosts hardened the roads. The Soviets made the most of this period of idleness from the Germans. Zhukov ordered around 250,000 citizens of Moscow to carve a defensive ring around the city with a radius of about ten miles, and this was reinforced by extra defensive rings within the city walls. The trenches and barricades were laden with rows of barbed wire and reinforced concrete. Additionally, houses that overlooked the barricades were converted into makeshift defensive positions by bricking up windows but leaving firing slits for gunmen to strike the enemy.

The manpower available to the Soviets at this stage, however, remained precarious. The USSR had a previously unseen tolerance for absorbing losses, but their numbers in the immediate vicinity of Moscow were currently depleted owing to the many sizable defeats suffered on their Western front. At this time they remained heavily outnumbered by the invaders, and the citizens of Moscow were growing nervous. In a display of political astuteness, Stalin ordered that the October Revolution Parade go ahead in Red Square on 7 November as it had done for the

last 24 years. Although this required many men to be held back from the front lines and trained in marching orders rather than battle tactics for several days, the parade galvanised and raised the spirits of Moscow's population. Stalin, who had sent others of his ruling party away from the city but decided to remain himself, added to the renewed fervour by delivering a powerful speech as the men prepared to march to the front.

Many soldiers were then sent needlessly to their deaths against the Germans, forgoing all the advantages they had enjoyed in defence, like entrenched positions. These counter-attacks were insisted on by Stalin, despite Zhukov warning him of the wastage of lives. Perhaps the most extreme example of this recklessness came from waves of Mongolian cavalry who had been drafted in from the East. With their sabres drawn high, the men on horseback charged across an open field towards prepared German gunfire. The soldiers and their steeds were laced with bullets, and in some cases exploded

as the enemy shells ruptured through their lines. And yet when the dust settled the German soldiers were amazed to see another wave of cavalymen charging in their direction, directly towards the obliterated corpses of their comrades. Neither the second or third wave got any closer than the first.

This is not to say that the Soviet counter-attacks

enjoyed no successes at all, however. At some pressure points across the vast German line, the Soviets inflicted thousands of casualties, and both the successes and failures left the Germans with a novel appreciation that perhaps their enemy was in fact far from defeated and would continue to fight defiantly for every inch of their beloved homeland.

Operation Typhoon resumed in the frost of mid-November. But although the ground was once again solid beneath their feet, the plummet in temperature to well below freezing, coupled with advancement yet further away from the stretched supply lines, left the Germans more harmed than helped as winter neared. The oil and lubricants in their tanks, vehicles and artillery shells began to freeze, and it became ever more difficult to keep the motor divisions running. The frost also rendered optical aiming instruments less accurate, and the narrow German tank treads struggled to gain traction on the icy roads.

But for all the frustrations of their machinery failing, the German soldiers themselves once more suffered worse. The Ostheer was drawing further from its supply

## STAND YOUR GROUND

How Stalin's NKVD blocking detachments prevented retreat by any means necessary

Although the outcome for Moscow was not quite as precarious as the closeness of the German army suggested it to be, the battle between the Germans and Soviets in 1941 was a brutal affair. Ideologically the two sides were staunchly opposed, with the Germans killing many 'Bolsheviks' and 'partisans' – of which many were unarmed citizens – in cold blood.

Many Soviet soldiers were additionally inspired to avenge fallen comrades and protect their motherland. Therefore the Red Army had much to fight for, but the element of fear should never be discounted. Some soldiers, especially those who were novices at soldiering, sought to flee. But Stalin would simply not allow it and turned to his trusted NKVD officers to ensure that the threat of death lay behind his men as well as in front.

The NKVD, or 'People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs', was established in 1934. It originally operated as a spying service, but throughout Stalin's reign it had grown in influence to act as the Soviet leader's brutal enforcement arm. By 1941 the NKVD had established rifle regiments to ensure Stalin's will was felt on the front lines. Mainly equipped with pistols and rifles, the NKVD 'blocking detachments' weren't intended as frontline combatants. Instead they operated as a second line with the mandate to ensure that no soldier – including officers – retreated without permission.

In the event of such a retreat, the blocking detachments would attempt to reverse the men with warnings – sometimes delivered as shots fired above their heads. If this didn't work then the soldiers were often arrested and detained, but in extreme cases fleeing men were simply shot dead by the NKVD troops.



**"GERMAN HIGH COMMAND KNEW THAT THEIR OBJECTIVES MUST BE ATTAINED BY WINTER IF THEY WERE TO HAVE ANY CHANCE OF SUCCESS"**





## INVASION

### DISPLACED

The unspoken tragedy of the Soviet peasants crushed between two opposing armies

By 21 November 1941, more German soldiers were in field hospitals because of illness than wounds. This was owed to the brutal Russian weather, which was steadfastly below freezing, and yet colder still with wind chill. Rather than quartering in winter barracks with warm clothes, the Germans remained on the march, edging closer to Moscow in their standard apparel while their appendages succumbed to frostbite and infections took hold in their lungs. The only reprieve the advancing soldiers could receive from the cold was in the villages and towns that sat on the path to the capital city. Thus these settlements became priority targets for the Germans to capture and for the Soviets to destroy, much to the horror of the poor families that called them home.

As the Ostheer had realised, warm clothing would not be forthcoming. Soldiers had wasted little time in stripping Russian citizens of possessions in their homes and the warm clothes covering their bodies. Some men were beaten as the soldiers tore their boots from the soles of their feet. As the cold deepened, so did the German soldier's cruelty. After capturing a village the men would throw families from their homes, stealing the warmth of their fires, comfort of their beds and food from their stores for themselves.

The sight of peasants freezing and starving to death was met largely with indifference. Rather than offering protection, when Stalin received word of the vulnerable state of the German army, he sought to deny them shelter by any means necessary. The Soviet leader targeted all settlements within tens of miles from the main roads and enemy lines and had many bombed into oblivion, whether or not citizens remained inside.



Russian peasants around Moscow suffered greatly at the hands of both armies



lines of rail networks, a problem which was compounded in the frost, as many of the transport trucks moving goods to the front began to fail. This meant that the men went hungry and received essentially no winter apparel. The clothing problem was made worse by Hitler's insistence that the Jewish factory labourers making sorely needed warm apparel be put to death instead of allowing them to finish their work.

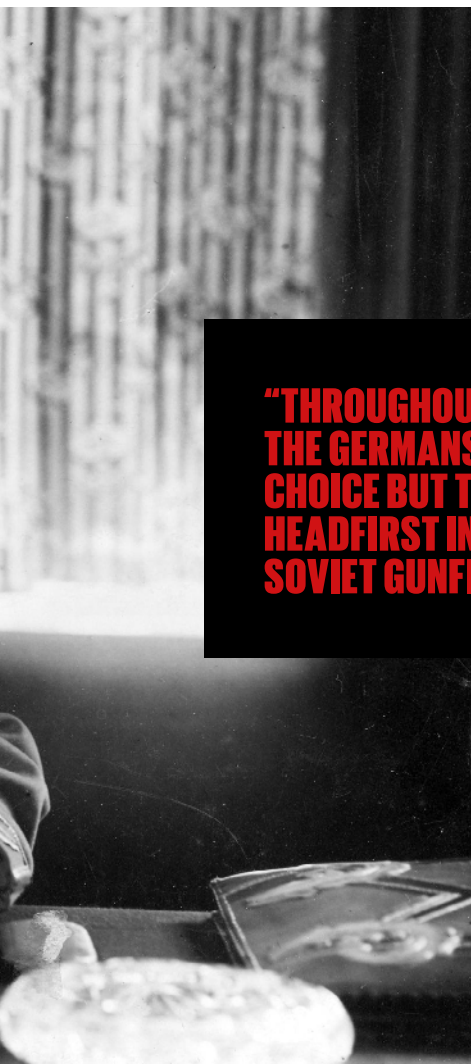
Despite these difficulties, the Germans continued their advance. Unlike many of the previous engagements the Ostheer had enjoyed - where the Panzer divisions exploited their mobility to outflank the enemy - throughout November the Germans had little choice but to charge headfirst into prepared Soviet gunfire. The war became one of attrition, and the Germans were losing men at a simply unsustainable rate. The Soviet propaganda movie, *Moscow Strikes Back*, summarised the German plight quite well: "They advanced, but over a landscape carpeted by Nazi dead."

The Soviets, to their credit, were conceding ground, but doing so slowly, fighting doggedly at each bottleneck. Siberian divisions, who specialised in cold-climate fighting, were drafted in from the Soviet's eastern front and waged total war against the German invaders. The defence of the village of Gorodishche saw 812 Siberian soldiers killed fighting to the last man. In situations where they enjoyed the reverse they repaid the compliment, killing all captured Germans - as was becoming standard practice. Both sides were becoming desperate, lacked the capacity to take prisoners and were harshly ideologically opposed. As such, prisoners were rarely taken, and so each man was often driven by fear to fight to their last breath.

At the northern pincer arm, Reinhardt and Hoepner's men endured dogged fighting headlong through woodland into fortified enemy positions. Snipers lay nestled in disguised elevated locations, heavy guns were entrenched in makeshift bunkers and seemingly



## AT THE GATES OF MOSCOW



**"THROUGHOUT NOVEMBER  
THE GERMANS HAD LITTLE  
CHOICE BUT TO CHARGE  
HEADFIRST INTO PREPARED  
SOVIET GUNFIRE"**

**Above Marshal  
Georgy Zhukov was  
drafted in by Stalin  
to mastermind the  
defence of Moscow**

indestructible heavy tanks had their cannons poised at the ready to greet the advancing columns. The roads were also obstructed with collapsed trees and laced with mines - sometimes thousands of them per square mile. The new Soviet tanks, namely the medium T-34 and heavy KV-1, were especially dangerous. Panzer divisions landed direct hits on them to no effect, while their cannons tore through the German armour. A single KV-1 managed to keep a battalion pinned for an entire day, only succumbing once its crew ran out of ammo.

The southern flanking arm of the German advance was fairing even worse. By mid-November the southern roads may have frosted over, but even 78 miles from the periphery of Moscow the roads bore few marks of German tank treads. Guderian's forces had suffered greatly from combat losses and cold-

related illnesses and were by this time operating at a meagre fraction of their former strength. His spearhead consisted of a division with just 15 tanks remaining, and elsewhere it wasn't much better. The battle group Guderian had used to capture the city of Tula en route to Moscow, for example, had been vastly depleted from 600 to 50 tanks. In a ludicrous indictment of insufficient logistical planning, Guderian's remnants still weren't supplied with enough fuel to make it to Moscow.

His forces had so few tanks that his men took the town of Yefremov without all the signatures of the German army: tanks, air support and many heavy guns. Yet despite this accomplishment, reports were soon forthcoming that Siberian regiments were being prepared for a counter-attack to recapture the town. It took three days for Guderian to realise the game was up. On 20 November he had to admit to high command that his objective was simply unattainable, coming to a halt well short of the Moscow border.

The Germans to the north persisted in their advance, moving from town to town, grinding through stiff resistance with great difficulty against pockets of a few hundred Russian soldiers at a time.

By 26 November Hoepner's men had captured the town of Istra, 22 miles from the border of Moscow. Advance parties pressed on with vigour and reached a village nine miles from the city, so close that they could glimpse it during clear skies and graze its outer suburbs with their artillery.

Yet this would be the closest the Germans would come to threatening Moscow. A tiny fraction of a battered and beleaguered force had nearly arrived at the gates. But even with considerably more soldiers, supplies and

morale, they would still be hard-pressed to break through the multiple battle lines Zhukov had erected in the city - and the soldiers and 48,000-strong civilian militia that stood behind them - and thanks to the climate and the soldiers of the Soviet Union, they were nowhere close to that position.

The ramifications of losing the Battle of Moscow were gargantuan. The Panzer divisions were decimated. This sacrifice had bruised the Soviet military, but by no means crippled it - and that was with the full might of German strength. With Moscow still in their hands the Soviets retained a beacon of hope, as well as the nexus of their logistical and trade networks.

As Stalin had shifted much of Soviet production further east, the USSR would have remained a formidable adversary even without Moscow, but the loss of their capital would have undeniably been a damaging blow. Contemporaries were right to suspect that if the Germans could not capture Moscow, the Soviets would soon be coming for Berlin. Although this would not be the last offensive for Soviet territory in the war, the Germans had missed their golden opportunity to debilitate the Soviet Union.

By 5 December the German offensive had well and truly abated, with Bock reporting to command that capturing Moscow was now impossible. The moment of peak German vulnerability had arrived, and Zhukov decided to strike while Soviet iron was hot and the German soldiers were freezing. Contrary to German estimations, the Soviets were far from down to their last few soldiers. Throughout the month of October Zhukov had raised four new armies, and he added eight more in November. 58 divisions of these had been purposefully held back from the front and remained unknown to the Nazi regime. Yet even without these reserves the Red Army now outnumbered the German Ostheer forces 4 million to 3 million. This was remarkable considering the calamitous Soviet defeats, and the vast reserves of manpower came as a nasty surprise to the Germans.

The counter began in earnest on 7 December, surprising and overwhelming German divisions across the front line. Bock's men narrowly escaped encirclement in several instances by withdrawing, despite Hitler repeatedly instructing them to stand their ground. Such was the effectiveness of Zhukov's counter that Army Group Centre was nearly destroyed in the reversal. But as the skies cleared, salvation for the Germans came in the form of the Luftwaffe, which dominated the skies and savaged the Soviet offensive. By 7 January the German lines had been pushed back around 62 miles, but the supply and fatigue problems that had so hampered their advance now plagued the Soviets, who could persist no further. A few hundred miles from Moscow, new battle lines were drawn, and the two sides settled in for another brutal round of battle. The Battle of Moscow had been lost, but the war was far from over.





# MURDER IN

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To the Nazis, victory in the East was only the beginning. Once they had secured mastery of the USSR, millions were marked to die to make Hitler's dreams a reality

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Completely cut off from the rest of the world, the people of Leningrad faced a cruel dilemma: eat or be eaten

## 48 KILLING GROUNDS

As the Wehrmacht scythed through the Soviet Union behind them lurked an even graver threat: the Waffen-SS - Hitler's fanatical death squads



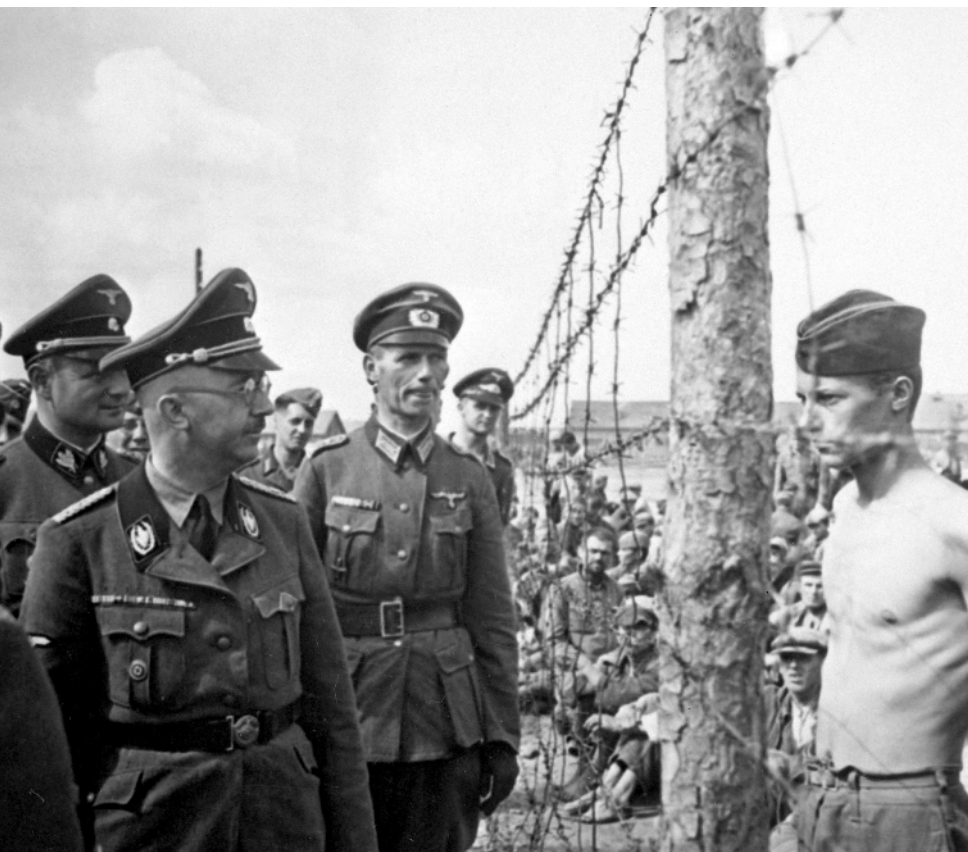
# THE EAST







## MURDER IN THE EAST



In 1941 Nazi Germany was approaching the peak of its military power, while the murderous intentions and imperialist ambitions of its leadership were becoming increasingly clear.

On 22 June the Nazi war machine launched an invasion of the Soviet Union - codenamed Operation Barbarossa - sending the largest invasion force ever seen and opening up the Eastern Front, which would soon become the bloodiest theatre of War World II.

But the advance eastwards was more than just a military assault. German expansion towards the East, or *Drang nach Osten*, had long been an aim of German nationalists seeking to create a larger and more dominant German nation. The Nazi concept of *Lebensraum*, or 'living space', meant that aggressive territorial expansion was a central principle behind its military strategy. In Eastern Europe this concept would be taken to its most sinister and shocking conclusions.

The invasion of the Soviet Union was merely one aspect of a broader geopolitical strategy known as *Generalplan Ost* (Master Plan for the East). Under this strategy, the Nazi Government sought to colonise and 'Germanise' a huge swathe of Central and Eastern Europe, with the overall aim of creating a racial empire by destroying the existing population. The plan represented the Nazi regime in all its cold, calculating brutality - a mixture of economic imperatives combined with vicious racial ideology. If it had been successful, it would have led

# GENERALPLAN OST

The Nazis had a plan to colonise Eastern Europe. Had it been realised, it would have had devastating consequences for millions of people

**WRITTEN BY ADAM QUARSHIE**



German tanks  
assembling near  
Rzhev, Russia, on  
5 September 1942



## GENERALPLAN OST

to the annihilation - by way of deportation, forced labour, starvation and mass killing - of up to 30 million people, primarily Jewish and Slavic, a figure which would have dwarfed even the horrors of the Holocaust. Generalplan Ost was epic in scope and genocidal in intention.

Several different versions of the document laying out Generalplan Ost have been discovered, most of which date to the years 1941 to 1942, though the first draft was written in 1940. The plan was drawn up by functionaries of the Reich Main Security Office (RHSA), an organisation whose stated aim was to fight internal and external 'enemies of the Reich'. These authors included Hans Ehlich, a doctor turned SS colonel, and Konrad Meyer, an agronomist and spatial planner who also came to work for the SS. Both men ultimately answered to Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer of the SS who had risen to become one of the most powerful men in Nazi Germany and would later become one of the chief architects of the Holocaust.

Generalplan Ost sought to conquer a number of countries, including parts of the Soviet Union, Poland, the Czech Republic - then still part of Czechoslovakia - Belarus, Ukraine and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. One aspect of the plan was economic: the intention was to seize the oil fields in the Caucasus and the grain fields of Ukraine in order to divert this food supply towards the German army, which was now fighting on two fronts.

However, Generalplan Ost was ultimately ideological: it sought to expand German territory, seize productive

agricultural land and eventually replace the existing population with German settlers. The plan contained both short and longer term goals. The Kleine Planung, or small plan, referred to the actions that would be taken over the course of the war, while the Grosse Planung referred to a longer time frame of 25 to 30 years after the Nazis envisioned winning the war.

It was in the details of the Grosse Planung that the true scope of the plan were revealed. With chilling precision, the plan estimated that tens of millions of people would have to be removed from the conquered areas, either by deporting them en masse to Siberia or by outright murder. The precise proportion of each population deemed to be disposable was calculated according to the brutal dictates of Nazi racial theory, ranging from 50 per cent of Estonians to 80 to 85 per cent of Poles. Poland, a country that had already suffered immensely from the brutalities of the Nazi regime since it was invaded in 1939, would have been effectively destroyed as a nation.

Though the final version of Generalplan Ost was dated October 1942, it was gradually abandoned as the German army was pushed back by the Red Army, eventually suffering defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad, which ended in February 1943. Though the Nazis were unable to fully implement the plan, it led to huge loss of life and shocking treatment of those living in occupied areas. Had it been fully implemented, it would have represented the full depths of depravity of the Nazi regime in what was already one of the bleakest moments in European history.

## THE HUNGER PLAN

The Hunger Plan sought to seize Soviet food supplies, starving millions to death as a result

On 2 May 1941, a group of Staatssekretäre (state secretaries) met in Berlin. The purpose of their meeting? To decide what should happen to the food supply of conquered territories in Eastern Europe. Though the minutes of the meeting, which have been pored over by scholars, do not contain the names of those who attended, it is believed that a group of between 12 and 18 high-ranking German officials and army officers were present.

The main outcome of the meeting was a strategy that has come to be known as the 'Hunger Plan'. It was a plan to seize Soviet food supplies from so-called 'surplus territories' in Ukraine, southern Russia and the Caucasus, redirecting them to the German army. The effects of this would have been grim: it was essentially a plan for mass murder by means of an engineered famine.

Though the Hunger Plan was never fully implemented, it nonetheless had devastating consequences. Its primary victims were the more than 3 million Soviet soldiers captured by the German army. Of these, it's estimated that close to 2 million were deliberately starved to death in prisoner-of-war camps.

The minutes of the May 1941 meeting were eventually used as evidence of war crimes during the Nuremberg trials. Herbert Backe, a prominent minister who went on to become Reich Minister for Food in 1942, was one of the principal authors of the strategy. He was put on trial at Nuremberg, but before he could be sentenced he committed suicide in his cell in April 1947.



Left Soviet prisoners of war being marched through southern Ukraine, June 1942







## MURDER IN THE EAST

# LENINGRAD CANNIBALS

Etched into their secret diaries, the starving people of Leningrad recorded the daily horrors of a siege intended to kill every last soul inside the city

WRITTEN BY CHARLIE EVANS



Alone in her home, 12-year-old Tanya Savicheva scrawled in her diary the heartbreaking words, "The Savichevs are dead. Everyone is dead. Only Tanya is left." The notebook, filled with misspellings in blue pencil, lists each

of her family members who she had seen die in agony from starvation.

First her older sister Zhenya, then her grandmother Yevdokiya, her brother Leka, and her two uncles, and finally "Mama on May 13th at 7:30 in the morning, 1942." Tanya was alone, abandoned in a city that had been entirely cut off from the outside world. But she was not alone in writing a diary. Across the city, hundreds of diarists were chronicling the horrors of one of the deadliest sieges in history, the extent of which would not be revealed until decades later.

In spring 1942, outside Tanya's home, the streets were strewn with more victims who had perished in the wake of Adolf Hitler's horrific plans to starve her city to death. The chilling directive had come on 22 September 1941 "St Petersburg must be erased from the face of the Earth. We have no interest in saving the lives of the civilian population." Nearly a third of the inhabitants would starve to death over the next 872 days while 150,000 shells were fired at the city and more than 107,000 incendiary and high-explosive bombs were dropped.

The 3 million people trapped in the once thriving city were left to survive on almost nothing - just 125 grams of dense, sticky, black bread made from a mixture of rye and oatmeal, kerosene and unfiltered malt. But the bitter-tasting bread offered little nutritional value and it did not stave off the pain of hunger.

Unprepared for the siege, it had taken just 12 weeks for German and Finnish forces to surround the city,



Above A corpse cart conveys its cargo to a makeshift cemetery where the dead lie heaped in the open

Right Pages from the diary of Tanya Savicheva



destroying hospitals, food stores, roads, schools, power plants and water supplies. Leningraders were forced to forage for anything they could that might offer more life-sustaining calories than the rationed bread alone. People started to eat anything they could stomach; leather belts boiled into jelly, the scrapings from the back of wallpaper, fur coats.

Elena Skryabina, a teacher of Russian literature, described in her diary on 3 October 1941 how she "visited a lady I know, and she let me try one of her culinary inventions - a jelly made from leather belts. The recipe is: cook belts made from pig leather and prepare a sort of aspic out of it. This nastiness beggars description! A sort of a yellowish colour and a horrible smell. Despite my extreme hunger, I couldn't bring myself to swallow even a spoonful, and gagged."



## LENINGRAD CANNIBALS



The city became rife with outbreaks of disease and the evermore gaunt populace was about to face a gruelling frost that would set into the already weakened city. Without food, a human might be able to survive up to 50 days. Beyond this, once the food in the gut has been used and the fat reserves depleted, the internal organs start to break down and the body starts to autocannibalism – an agonising and slow process that leads to a painful death that first devours the body and then the mind.

As the thermometer mark dropped below -32.1 degrees Celsius, people started burning everything they could find to heat their homes, starting with the furniture before the cherished family books. But some precious notebooks were kept as writing had become an important way of coping for many of the people confined to the city.

As the hunger became more and more intolerable, it wasn't long before birds, rats and stray dogs and cats started disappearing from the streets. And when this resource ran out, Leningraders traded beloved pets with their neighbours so they were not forced to kill and eat their own. At this point, Leningraders started to show symptoms of extreme starvation, moving slowly through the streets with sunken eyes and extended stomachs swollen from the effects of oedema as a result of malnutrition.

"[They're] horrible, only skeletons, not people," wrote factory worker Ivan Savinkov in his diary. Klavdiya Naumovna, a doctor at a Leningrad hospital, had similar

### THE EFFECTS OF STARVATION

How the body breaks down after 50 days without food

#### DEHYDRATION

Dehydration caused by being too weak to drink or having the ability to feel thirst causes dry, flaky, cracked skin and lips.

#### PSYCHOSIS

The brain starts to deteriorate, causing a decline in comprehension and judgment, followed by social withdrawal and eventually hysteria, confusion and hallucinations.

#### VITAMIN DEFICIENCY

The lack of vitamins causes the skin to become bruised and gums to bleed.

#### HEART FAILURE

The heart becomes unable to effectively pump blood around the body due to the lack of potassium, sodium, calcium and magnesium minerals.

#### IMMUNE SYSTEM IMPAIRMENT

White blood cells start to struggle to defend against invasive pathogens, causing slow wound healing and susceptibility to infections.

#### INTERNAL ORGAN SHRINKAGE

The gut shrinks from oesophagus to rectum, causing the body to become less able to extract nutrients from the already nutritionally limited food.

#### AUTO-CANNIBALISM OF MUSCLE

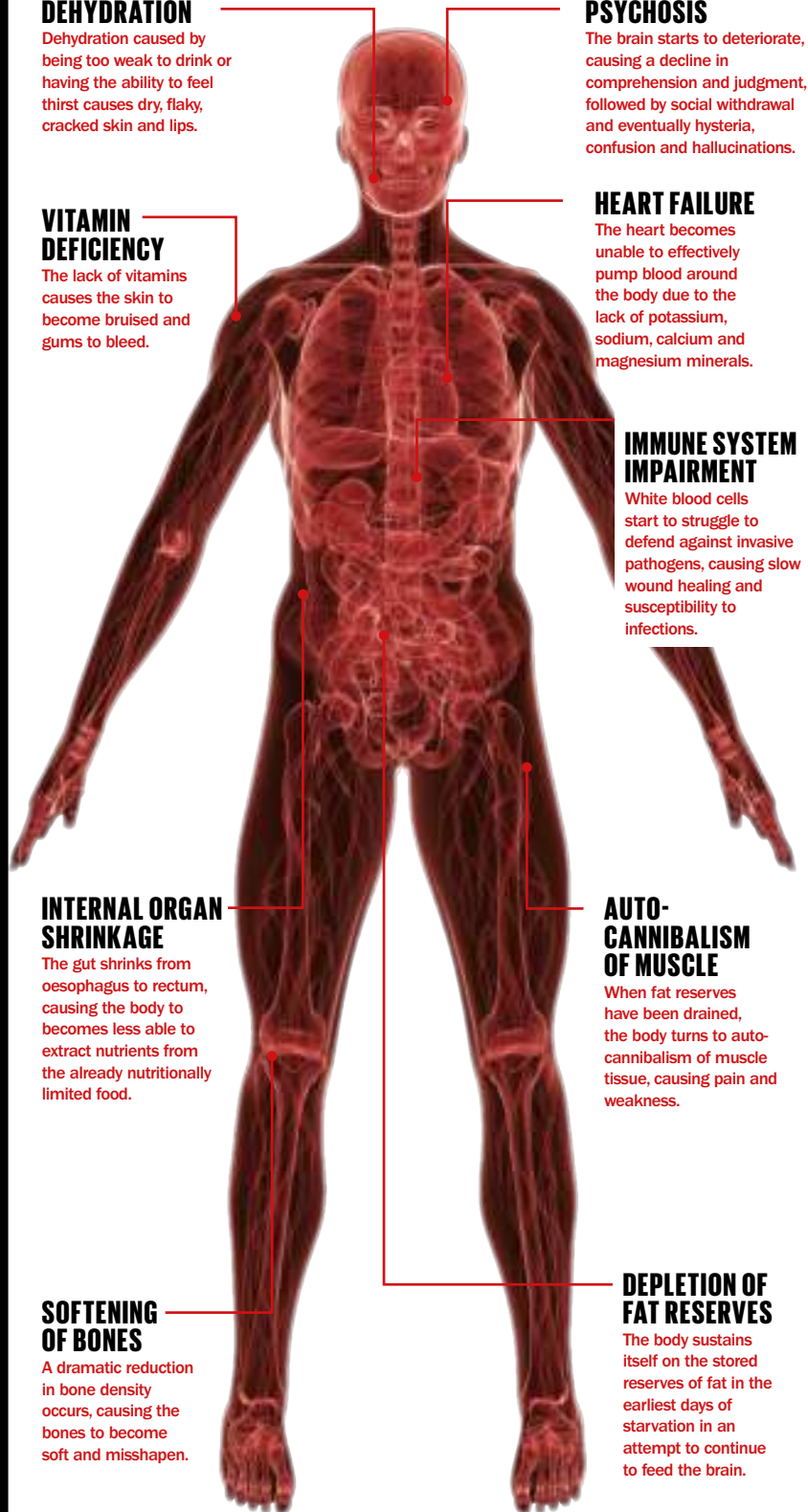
When fat reserves have been drained, the body turns to auto-cannibalism of muscle tissue, causing pain and weakness.

#### SOFTENING OF BONES

A dramatic reduction in bone density occurs, causing the bones to become soft and misshapen.

#### DEPLETION OF FAT RESERVES

The body sustains itself on the stored reserves of fat in the earliest days of starvation in an attempt to continue to feed the brain.







## MURDER IN THE EAST

sentiments in his diary, writing, "These aren't people, rather skeletons with dry skin of a horrible colour stretched over them. Their consciousness is muddled, there's a kind of dullness and doltishness about them.

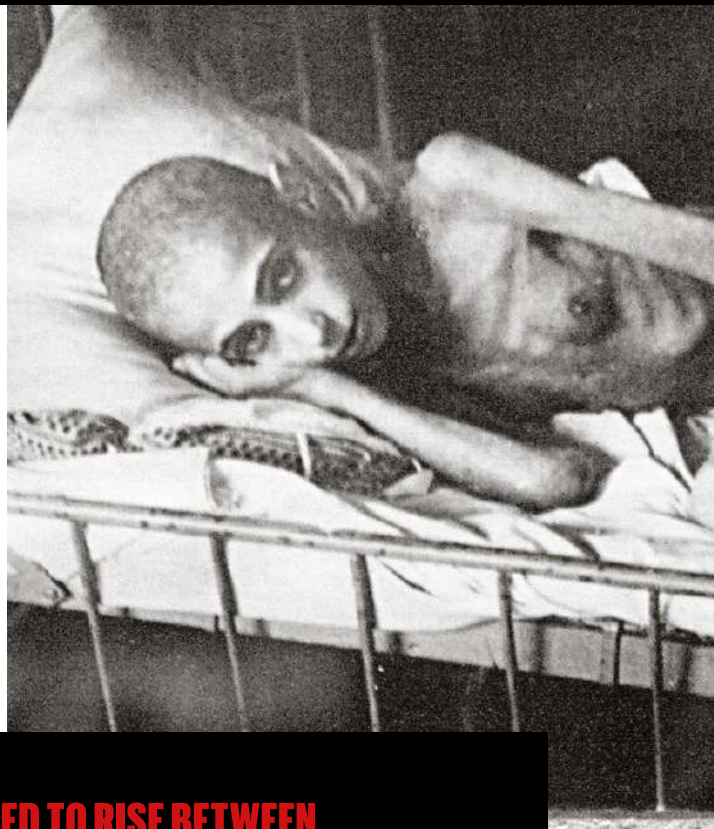
"They lack strength completely. Today I saw a patient like that; he walked to the hospital by himself, but died two hours later."

Uncoffined bodies were dragged through the streets on sleds to be buried in mass graves. It's no wonder, that between the hunger and the heavy artillery bombardment, that tensions started to rise, first between neighbours and then between families as people were killed for ration cards and others started secretly keeping dead loved ones to claim their rations. These rising tensions didn't go unnoticed by the people of the starving city. Arkadii Lepkovich noticed how the blockade started to erode his marriage as he and his wife grew increasingly suspicious of one another. "Even relations between mother and child, husband and wife, have been made completely inhuman," he wrote. "The whole city has become this way because the battle for life has brought despair to every living individual."

People were going to increasing lengths to find a way to feed themselves and their families, with mothers even cutting their veins to feed their children blood. And then they became paranoid of one another. Rumours began to spread that others were dining on much worse than their beloved pets. Children started disappearing, bodies went missing from the cemetery, corpses on the

**Right** A victim of starvation suffering from muscle atrophy gazes hauntingly at a photographer

**Below** Two women hack up a horse killed by a German bombardment for its precious meat



**"TENSIONS STARTED TO RISE BETWEEN NEIGHBOURS AND THEN FAMILIES AS PEOPLE WERE KILLED FOR RATION CARDS AND OTHERS KEPT DEAD LOVED ONES TO CLAIM THEIR RATIONS"**



streets had parts missing. On 13 December 1941, the people of Leningrad's fears were confirmed - the NKVD, Stalin's notorious secret police, filed the first report of the consumption of human flesh.

Eating human meat is not for the fainthearted. It is a gruesome task that requires hours of preparation to hack through bone, pull apart the limbs and carve out chunks of edible flesh, all the while being careful not to contaminate the meat by slicing the intestines. But if it can be stomach, human meat can provide protein, calories and nutrition for those who have no other choice. And the cuts of human flesh, beef-like in texture and pork-like in taste, can provide a welcome meal. With the fat stripped and muscle ground up, marrow scooped from the inside of bones, and cooked internal organs, a human corpse can be enough to sustain someone for several weeks. Historically, eating deceased kin has been a lifeline in times of famine, and over the period of the siege 1,207 individuals were convicted for cannibalism.

The Russian language distinguishes two types of cannibalism - 'trupoedstvo' (eating the flesh from someone who is already dead) and 'liudoedstvo' (killing and eating a person). In Leningrad, both corpse-eating and people-eating became a new horror in the unfolding



## LENINGRAD CANNIBALS



nightmare of the siege. And it wasn't long before these sources of food became available on the black market and people stopped asking each other where they had found such tender, succulent meat in such a time of terrible famine. One account from survivor Galina Yakovleva remembers a strange warm smell coming from a room and realising it emanated from the flesh of a corpse prepared for food.

"In the twilight, there were huge chunks of meat hung from hooks to the ceiling. And one piece was a human hand with long fingers and blue veins..."

Most of the perpetrators of cannibalism in Leningrad had not been criminals - only 18 people had previous convictions. Instead, they were people driven to such lengths by starvation, madness and the will to survive and save their families. The vast majority of those who resorted to cannibalism were eating corpses that had already died and were unsupported women with young children. But the NKVD reports do detail some grisly occasions when Leningraders killed others in the pursuit of a meal.

One of these reports includes a 42-year-old river port worker and his son who murdered, dismembered and ate their two housemates (in the report named only by their initials, M and I) before distributing the flesh, under the guise of horse meat, to trade for wine and cigarettes. On another occasion, the wife of a Red Army soldier lured a 13-year-old girl into her room and killed her with an axe to feed to her two dependent children aged between eight and 11 years old.

There were so many reports of corpse-eating and people-eating that the NKVD started a special unit of

police and psychiatrists dedicated to trying to minimise the number of cannibalistic instances.

Despite these tragedies, and the crimes that were committed in the name of survival, many Leningraders still clung to humanity, determined that their suffering would not mean they would lose themselves. After the first devastating winter, in the summer of 1942 people found ways to stay optimistic, with one diarist Klavdiya Naumovna writing, "The people are clean; they've started to wear nice dresses. The tram is running, shops are opening up bit by bit. There are queues at the perfume shops - there's been a delivery of perfume to Leningrad... I was very happy. I love perfume so! I put some on myself and I feel like I'm not hungry, like I've just returned from a concert or a restaurant."

The siege ended on 27 January 1944 when Soviet soldiers punctured the German line of defence and recaptured hundreds of towns and villages in the region. As the siege ended, the government passed out cabbage and carrot seeds, and the people of Leningrad planted every available piece of land with vegetables and celebrated their victory in the streets.

Cats were introduced into the city again to protect the new crops from rats. People came together to start to rebuild. Families were reunited with loved ones who were outside the blockade when the circle closed, real bread made from flour returned to the market, and a healthy glow came back to the complexions of the survivors. Life had returned to Leningrad.

The diaries and NKVD reports would languish in archives behind the Iron Curtain, for the most part unread until the 21st century.

As memory coalesced around the narrative of collective suffering, defiance and heroism in the face of the fascist aggressor, there was no room for personal stories in the sweeping opera of the Great Patriotic War, and certainly not stories that introduced soul-searching and moral ambiguity.

The humanity and determination to try to maintain a normal life through adversity enabled many to survive the 872-day siege, which ultimately claimed 1.5 million lives. Through the hardship, though the people of Leningrad were pushed to the limits of human survival, a sense of great solidarity and triumphant resistance persisted; for every story of murder and cannibalism there are 100 more that detail the selfless efforts of people who chose to fight for the lives of others.

Stories of already struggling mothers taking in orphaned children, people sharing the last of their bread rations with strangers, and groups risking their lives to bring supplies across the Road of Life over frozen Lake Lagoda remain as inspiring today as they were in 1944.

Although much of its history was wiped clean, stories of love and loss continue to surface, a reminder that Leningrad was never wiped out, that evil, in the end, was vanquished by the courage of the human spirit.

## FOOD OF THE SIEGE

In an attempt to survive, Leningraders were forced to find nourishment anywhere they could...

### BEAUTY PRODUCTS



Lipstick, fried toothpaste and even face-powder pancakes are all items listed in diaries as sources of food for Leningraders.

### SOIL



The heavy bombing of food reserves included the destruction of sugar storages. The soil could be dug up and

either mixed with flour or sucked upon for sweetness.

### WATER



Water eased the hunger pains and Leningraders would search for water under the icy blanket that covered

Russia in the winter or would dig holes into the ice of lakes.

### LEATHER



Anything made from leather could be turned into a grimy jelly or a pate, including belts and briefcases.

### WALLPAPER PASTE



People stripped the walls of wallpaper, scraping the paste from the inside to make into a soup, and then eating

the paper. Other people ate the paste directly from glue jars.

### ANIMAL FOOD



Tins of cat food were opened and served for dinner, and flaxseed and oats for the cattle and horses became a

vital source of nutrients for the starving people of Leningrad.

### CHICKWEED



The people of Leningrad turned to harvesting chickweed and started to pickle weeds and

grasses to make them more palatable. This resourcefulness saw many saved from the fatal effects of scurvy.





**MURDER IN THE EAST**

# KILLING GROUNDS

The mass murder of civilians on the Eastern Front was part of the most despicable genocide in human history

**WRITTEN BY JAMES HORTON**





## KILLING GROUNDS



here have been many examples of mass murder during periods of war. Roman legions flooded over walls of defending settlements and massacred all inside. Mongol hordes decimated army after army and razed cities to the ground. Millions have starved to death as warring armies ravaged their land in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. But the Nazi genocide marks something quite different. It represents a targeted, organised and ruthless strategy of forced labour and mass murder on the scale of millions. Murder of certain peoples was the objective from the outset, a precedent that Hitler and his party had established in the 1930s with their increasing aggressiveness then outright violence against Germany's Jewish population. Upon the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Hitler brought this despicable ideology within the gates of the USSR and inflicted it upon the Jewish, Slavic and Bolshevik people who lived there.

The depravity of the genocide is a blight on human history. The actions of the Nazi forces expose us to the abominable cruelty of which humans are capable, the complete lack of empathy we can achieve if we embrace racist ideologies and the ease in which otherwise decent people can be indoctrinated into radical world views.

Why was Hitler so intent on brutality in the East? One key element is his dedication to acquiring Lebensraum (living space) for German colonists. The origin of Lebensraum preceded Hitler. The idea was proposed by Friedrich Ratzel when the age of imperialism was at its height in Europe. Germany, like its neighbours, harboured imperialist visions, and by the outbreak of World War I advocated for achieving Lebensraum by seizing the territory of Russia. The rhetoric surrounding the capture of Baltic provinces during the war was troubling, with journalists celebrating the introduction of 'German seed' into the 'Russian Badlands'. Even after losing the war Germany continued with these colonial pursuits into 1919 by supporting guerrilla soldiers known as the Freikorps.

As Hitler ascended to power his desire for Lebensraum never wavered, in part as he had been convinced by the academic Karl Haushofer that a weakness of mainland Germany was its capacity to yield enough food. The main concern for the Baltic population was that for living space to be acquired there must be just that - space. Hitler's proposal to make room for his German colonists was to force the Russians to emigrate to Siberia or send them into slave labour. The additional third approach, taken far too often during the war, was to simply kill them.

But a desire for colonisable territory was not the only reason Hitler's men committed such heinous acts with such vigour. A key element in convincing soldiers to commit mass murder is to strongly ideologically oppose and dehumanise the enemy. Thus the denigration of Slavic peoples and Bolsheviks alongside Jews went hand in hand with the pursuits of Lebensraum. As had been





## MURDER IN THE EAST

established by the rhetoric used by German reporters in the previous war, many Germans saw the Russians living in the 'Badlands' as a lesser people. This mentality broadly swept to include all Slavic peoples who resided on the Eastern Front. But a special hatred was reserved for Bolsheviks, who had become twisted and entangled in Hitler's mind with the Jewry. Through discussions with fellow Nazi party member Alfred Rosenberg, Hitler had become convinced that the Jewish population was behind the destabilising Bolshevik revolution in Russia. To Hitler and those who shared his views, a population of undesirables were acting at the behest of Germany's most vilified enemy will occupying desirable land. Therefore it was considered imperative that these other peoples were also annihilated in the maelstrom primarily designed to destroy the Jewish population - Hitler's 'final solution'. For many in Hitler's security forces and military, it was not hard to adopt a radical stance against such a foe.

Many of Hitler's most willing acolytes eagerly joined his security arm, the Einsatzgruppen. These units were arranged into groups around 3,000 strong and followed in the wake of the rampaging Wehrmacht as it swept through Soviet territory in the summer of 1941. The Einsatzgruppen's primary objective was to establish German control over captured territory. This involved establishing spy networks, sniffing out locals planning resistance and severely persecuting 'undesirable' citizens. The units were marauding bands of murderers who were largely composed of security police and SS forces supported by the army, allied military, local police and sometimes local citizens as they carried out massacre after massacre. Jews were thoroughly rooted out of the population and either secluded to ghettos, sent to forced labour camps or killed in mass shootings.

Commissars - who were considered by the Nazi's as Communist puppet masters manipulating weak-minded citizens - were captured and enslaved or killed with equal relish. So too were Roma, or gypsies, and those with mental or physical disabilities, who were deemed no use as labourers and so instead were put to death. The killing squads committed atrocities that extended to women and children, who like their brothers, husbands, sons and fathers were stripped, shot and thrown in mass graves.

Such was the sadistic menace operating from these units that many committed their killings in a bespoke manner, with some forgoing shootings to lock Jewish captives in synagogues, starving them then burning them alive. The scale of these mass murders was so immense that significant efforts were made to improve the efficiency of killings - group shootings of unarmed citizens was deemed too messy and stressful for the German soldiers to go through repeatedly. Mobile gas units were transported to Soviet territory to suffocate those inside with carbon monoxide. This abhorrent method was a precursor to the infamous Zyklon B, which would soon be employed on a huge scale in gas chambers in



The dead would be piled into pits until they brimmed with bodies







## KILLING GROUNDS



Many soldiers took pleasure in killing those deemed undesirable, such as these Soviet prisoners

### BABI YAR

A two-day massacre marked German intent in the Soviet region

German forces captured the city of Kiev in Ukraine at the beginning of autumn 1941, defeating a massive Soviet army and taking hundreds of thousands of soldiers prisoner. Yet at the beginning of German occupation Soviet forces continued to resist, detonating two bombs to wound their captors. This act incited a horrific degree of violence against the Jewish population still in the city.

With an argument of retribution as their justification, the German soldiers rounded up Jewish citizens who'd been unable to flee from the Wehrmacht on its way to the city. As such, many of these Jews were the elderly, infirm, women and children. Despite this, the terrified citizens were escorted by the Einsatzgruppen, SS, German police and their auxiliaries to a ravine at Babi Yar. Between 29 and 30 September, the Germans forced wave after wave of victims to strip and stand at the end of the ravine before shooting them. 33,771 people were killed over this two-day period.

Babi Yar was one of the worst massacres committed in the war, and the site would be used for many more executions over the following two years of German occupation. In total it's estimated that around 100,000 lives ended on the edge of the ravine at Babi Yar. The Germans were forced into retreat in 1943 but did not leave before attempting to disguise their crimes. They exhumed the bodies from the ravine and burned them on massive pyres. But their efforts were in vain, and the true horrors of the Babi Yar massacre were laid bare in a Soviet court in the city in 1946 as survivors told their harrowing tales.



Babi Yar in Ukraine, photographed by the Luftwaffe in 1943

concentration camps. These efforts allowed a single operational unit of a few thousand men to kill hundreds of thousands of citizens over just two years.

It is tempting to lay the blame for these atrocities solely at the feet of the SS and Einsatzgruppen, who 'pacified' the rear while the Wehrmacht 'nobly' battled on the front line. But the military and its personnel acted in concert with these war crimes throughout their efforts on the Eastern Front. These acts weren't just quietly committed but instead were actively decreed by Nazi command. The Commissar Order was ruthlessly enforced by the killing squads, who captured and killed Soviet Communist Party officials with severe prejudice. The soldiers on the front line carried the same orders and killed many commissars throughout 1941 and into 1942. As the Soviet campaign wore on, however, this prerogative was relaxed

as Wehrmacht command realised that rather than deflate resistance, the response was vitriolic. Word had spread about the killings of commissars, and it had the ironic consequence of hardening Soviet resistance.

The orders contained within the Barbarossa Decree, however, continued to be committed throughout the campaign. The decree was dispersed to the men in the summer of 1941 and outlined how soldiers should 'handle' encountered Soviet citizens. The document awarded soldiers a license to attack and kill civilians when faced with aggression. High command espoused that transporting arrested individuals was unfeasible at the front, and so court-martials were suspended and instead officers could arrange firing squads without trial. Many soldiers didn't even allow the process to get that far, instead shooting 'enemy aggressors' themselves without consultation. By July commanders on the front received orders to destroy the correspondence but with the insistence that soldiers continued to adhere to its contents. This was a total war, and despite knowing what the global community would make of their barbarism, the Nazis were committed to enacting it.

A commander at the front's prerogative was, first and foremost, to win their battles and secure victory in the war. This priority was compounded by the difficulty the campaign commanders faced, especially in the autumn of 1941 as the Wehrmacht made its bold dash to Moscow. As such, the brutal commands were met largely with a cold indifference by the heads of military, who cared little about the impending suffering of the local populace. Commanders heeded these instructions to differing degrees. Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein forbade his men from volunteering to join executions, and Generalleutnant John Ansatz defiantly declared that his soldiers were "no hangman's assistants". But these weren't acts of noble compassion; rather it was concern over maintaining the discipline of their men.

Commanders were right to suspect soldiers would become unruly, as what high command granted was, in effect, carte blanche to commit as many war crimes as a soldier desired. When murder, the most extreme punishment of them all, was permitted, the soldiers felt vindicated to do almost anything to 'undesirables' in the local populace. Even rape - a truly despicable act regrettably common in many wars and raids throughout history - was banned, but its justification was on racist grounds. The Slavic peoples were considered inferior to the Germans, but many were raped and forced into prostitution when towns were captured regardless.

The German soldiers became especially vicious as their own situation deteriorated. Nazi command had factored in that during the Soviet 'lightning campaign' soldiers would be required to live off the land to an extent. It had been calculated that millions of Baltic citizens would starve to death at the expense of feeding the German military. This was considered a bonus rather





## MURDER IN THE EAST

### CAPTIVE

The inhumane treatment Soviet prisoners of war had to endure

As the German tanks enveloped their lines and forced the Soviet soldiers to surrender in the summer and autumn of 1941, over a million soldiers must have wondered if, for them, the worst of the war was over. But their horrors had only just begun.

Soviet prisoners of war suffered horribly under the Nazi regime. In 1941, captured Soviet soldiers were transported en masse to forced labour camps, where they toiled on minimal rations. Officially they were allotted an underwhelming ration of around 2,200 calories per day, but in practice few received such a bounty. The Nazi's instead opted to feed them bread made from 'wood flour', which was essentially made from sawdust. This substitute bread was barely edible and offered minimal nutritional value, and even this wasn't offered to the men in bulk. As such, many succumbed to malnutrition, while those who endured grew so ravenous they supplemented their rations with grass to assuage their hunger. There was no respite from starvation and no mercy away from it, as men were shot dead if they collapsed from exhaustion while being force-marched or if they succumbed to illness or injury.

From 1942, conditions for the prisoners began to improve as the German economy continued to fail. The men's reprieve was owed to their value as labourers, but this mercy was not extended to Jews, who were persistently killed despite their value. Even still, over 50 per cent of Soviet soldiers taken prisoner died during the war. And how did the Soviet Union repay those who had suffered so bitterly after defending their motherland? Incredulously, sometimes with more forced labour if they were suspicious of a returning soldier's loyalties. For those poor souls it was simply a transition from one hellscape to another as they were forced into confinement in a Soviet labour camp.



Russian peasants around Moscow suffered greatly at the hands of both armies

than a detraction of the strategy. But as the campaign wore on, the frosts descended and the land became barren, the cold and hunger instilled additional layers of cruelty into the German soldiers. The longer the campaign continued, the more incentive the men had to murder and pillage. This mistreatment of citizens was compounded by Soviet efforts to harass the Germans from behind enemy lines. Soviet soldiers known as partisans waged a guerrilla war against the Wehrmacht, planting explosives and staging ambushes before seeking refuge in the rural lands of the Soviet Union. A partisan, to the German soldier's eye, was often indistinguishable from an ordinary citizen. This led to the butchering of many suspected 'partisans' in the villages, towns and cities of the Soviet Union.

Hitler's original vision of eviction and forced imprisonment of the population to acquire Lebensraum had distorted into a reality yet more brutal. This is not to suggest, however, that a rapid German victory would have resulted in less Slavic deaths. The western side of the Soviet Union was integral to its farming efforts. Had Hitler forced the native peoples to the arid terrain of the east, many millions would have likely starved. Those that remained would have met the same fate but in forced labour camps. This would have been by design, as the starvation that Soviet prisoners of war suffered in imprisonment was no mere consequence of war. British and American prisoners, who were considered an equal race by the Germans, did not starve to anywhere near the same degree.

The heinous war crimes continued as the momentum turned against the Germans and they were forced into retreat. In 1943, after a series of reversals, the Wehrmacht fell back through Poland, driving 45,000 citizens into labour camps on their way through. However, there was no infrastructure to support them. They had no shelter in which to sleep and no sanitary houses in which to relieve themselves. As a result, many died in miserable conditions from starvation and disease.

We might expect the German resolve to have softened as they were forced into retreat - or at least that they would refocus their efforts away from harming Soviet citizens. But following the huge number of despicable actions undertaken during the war, many would have become entrenched in their belief that their enemies were lesser humans. To realise that the 'barbaric Russians' who had bested them were, in fact, human beings of the same standing would be unconscionable to many German soldiers given what they'd done to them. Throughout World War II, 1.5 million Jews were put to death in Soviet territory. This was but a fraction of the 27 million citizens of the Soviet Union who died as a result of the invasion. This genocide was an act of evil, one which we have not recovered from today. Scarred memories, forgotten families and the destruction of millions of lives are the legacy this war left behind.

**Right** This model of van was converted into mobile gas chambers used to kill citizens with carbon monoxide



**Below** The horrors of Babi Yar were exposed by survivor Dina Pronicheva in a Soviet court in 1946







## KILLING GROUNDS







# THE BEGINNING

## **56 STALINGRAD**

In the bloodiest battle in human history, defeat would mean total annihilation

## **80 OPERATION LITTLE SATURN**

Desperate to exploit the successes of Uranus, the Soviets unleashed a follow-up operation aimed at pushing the Wehrmacht even further back

## **60 PAVLOV'S HOUSE**

Despite being completely surrounded and constantly pounded by German guns, a few stout Soviet troops held out for months inside a bullet-ridden Stalingrad block

## **84 THE THIRD BATTLE OF KHARKOV**

By early 1943 the German forces in the East were reeling from several setbacks, the Soviets' advance now seemingly unstoppable. Fortunately for the Wehrmacht, they possessed a general capable of exploiting even the smallest opportunity

## **62 SNIPERS OF THE EASTERN FRONT**

Meet the deadly sharpshooters who sowed death from afar

# OF THE END

## **66 INTERVIEW WITH A SOVIET SNIPER**

When war erupted in the East, Yulia Zhukova was a young girl full of hopes and dreams. By its end she would be a ruthless hunter of Germans

## **74 ZHUKOV'S SCYTHES OF VENGEANCE**

Certain of victory in Stalingrad, German high command was totally unaware of the enormous danger building behind the city

## **78 HELPING THE RED ARMY**

Without the Lend-Lease Act the Soviets would never have been able to maintain their war effort





## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

# THE BLOODIEST BATTLE IN HISTORY

The outcome of WWII and the fate of the Third Reich was decided in the bloodied ruins of Stalingrad

WRITTEN BY CHARLES GINGER



he pivotal battle of World War II was fought in the Soviet city of Stalingrad. While not the most strategically vital location for either side, its very name made it a point of obsession for both Hitler and Stalin. When the guns

finally fell silent among the ruins in February 1943, over 1 million Wehrmacht and Soviet soldiers, not to mention innocent Soviet civilians, lay dead.

The idea of Stalingrad's capture began to germinate in Hitler's mind in April 1942, following the petering out of the Soviet counter-offensive that prevented the Wehrmacht taking Moscow. The objective was to take the city before racing on to secure the oilfields in the Caucasus beyond, simultaneously securing a vital supply for the German armies while cutting off the Soviet's access to it. With the Soviet offensive at Kharkov defeated in May, the path to Stalingrad lay open.

As General Timoshenko's battered forces retreated in the face of two German Panzer armies (the 17th under Ewald von Kleist and the 6th under Friedrich Paulus) a Stalingrad Front was declared by the Soviets, which they frantically raced to fill with reserve forces from Moscow. The race was on to adequately prepare the city for the German onslaught. But it would not just be the soldiers who would be required to defend Stalingrad.

Almost 200,000 civilians were mobilised and organised into workers columns to dig anti-tank ditches up to six feet deep while army sappers laid mines. Even schoolchildren were deployed to construct earth walls around the precious petrol tanks along the Volga River. Anti-aircraft batteries were formed by young women, with guns situated on both banks of the Volga in order to defend vital positions such as the Beketavka power station and the infamous Tractor Factory, which had been converted to build the much-feared T-34 tanks. Every single pair of hands would be needed if total annihilation was to be averted.

Overall command of the operation to save Stalingrad fell to the ruthless General Vasilii Chuikov. Notorious

for his incredibly explosive temper, Chuikov worked tirelessly to raise the morale of his beleaguered troops while instilling terror into any commanders that dared to imagine retreat. Any deserters would be shot.

Chuikov's approach to the perilous situation was simple: "Time is blood." The longer the coming battle raged, the more it would cost the Germans. Every obstacle was to be placed in their way. Even immobile tanks were dug into positions to provide fire. If Stalingrad was to be taken, it would be inch by blood-soaked inch.

### FIRESTORM

Having battled across the Don River on 21 August, the Germans began their assault on Stalingrad on 23 August even before they'd reached the Volga. Under the command of General von Richthofen, the entire 4th Air Fleet, comprising 1,200 aircraft (both Junkers 88 and Heinkel 111 bombers) headed for Stalingrad to ignite a biblical inferno. In a total of 1,600 sorties, Richthofen's pilots dropped approximately 1,000 tons of explosives, losing only three planes in the process. Thousands of civilians died in the carnage, still in the city due to Stalin's refusal to evacuate them for fear of spreading

Below Soviet troops dash through the ruins of Stalingrad





## THE BLOODIEST BATTLE IN HISTORY

mass panic. Wooden houses were reduced to ash as apartment blocks were either gutted or collapsed entirely. By indiscriminately carpet-bombing the entire city, the Luftwaffe hit the hospital, waterworks and telephone lines, as well as bombing the petrol tanks lining the river, sending flames 1,500 feet into the blackened sky above the city.

With what was to become a lengthy bombardment now underway, the 16th Panzer Division surged across the steppe towards the city. Despite the valiant efforts of the anti-aircraft batteries, who rained 37mm shells down upon the invaders, the Panzer crews pressed on, aided by Stuka aircraft. By the afternoon of the 23rd they reached the Volga.

Confident that such a pulverising would have broken the Soviet's will and ability to resist, the Germans anticipated a relatively swift victory. But in a dark twist of irony, they had actually helped to sow the seeds of their own downfall. The churned-up remains of Stalingrad would prove to be a cramped killing field in which snipers and close-quarters fighting ruled. This was no place for the rapid, sweeping manoeuvres favoured by the German invaders.

In the days that followed the terror bombing, General Hoth's forces slowly trudged forwards, pushing the Russian 64th Army back. Emboldened by the relatively weak Soviet resistance in the lead up to the assault, Paulus decided to send his men straight into the fray upon their arrival instead of allowing them to rest. As German soldiers fed into the rubble-strewn streets, so too did Soviet reinforcements.

The situation facing the Soviets was utterly dire, so desperate in fact, that as their men ran towards the enemy, machine gun posts were set up behind them. Their choice was clear: die fighting or die retreating. The fact that they had to rely on supplies shipped across the Volga under heavy German fire didn't help either.

Working in tandem with their pilot colleagues, the Panzers continued to fight their way through the city, all the while conscious of the vulnerability of their tanks in the narrow streets. By 31 August the Germans were at the Stalingrad-Morozask railway. Paulus now firmly believed that the Russian 62nd and 64th armies could be divided and finished off.

The arrival of Marshal Georgy Zhukov two days earlier had again revealed the scale of the task facing the Soviets.

**Below Sergeant Yakov Fedotovitch Pavlov became a hero after his platoon recaptured and defended a building that came to be known as 'Pavlov's House'**







## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Morale was collapsing under the strain of the German aerial bombardment, with one divisional commander resorting to lining up his men and shooting every tenth one until his gun ran out. Just as the Soviets were preparing to unleash a counter-attack in an attempt to stem the Panzer advance, Zhukov began imploring Stalin to delay it.

The marshal discovered the troops assigned to the job were poorly equipped, low on ammunition and predominantly made up of old reservists. Yet despite the obvious flaws in the Red Army, Stalin became increasingly nervous, citing the encroachment of German tanks as the reason that any delay could prove fatal. Zhukov did eventually succeed in gaining an extra two days, but they made little difference, for the advance that proceeded was a short-lived one.

### FIGHTBACK

The 1st Guards Army only managed to push on a few miles into the Russian steppe, while the 24th Army literally found itself back at square one, having totally failed to gain any ground. However, the attack had not been completely in vain. It had forced Paulus to divert his reserve forces just as the shattered remains of the 62nd and 64th armies were pushed back to the perimeters of the city. The Germans had paid heavily, losing six battalion commanders in a single day and seeing many companies decimated, some left with as few as 40 men.

From grenades to Molotov cocktails, the Soviets used all available means. Many rushed into the fray without weapons, forced to wait until a comrade fell before taking their rifle. It's no surprise that the life expectancy for a soldier arriving in the city was less than 24 hours.

With fewer than 40,000 fighters left to confront the 6th Army and 4th Panzer Army, the Germans believed that it was simply a matter of time before Stalingrad would fall.



### DEFENDING PAVLOV'S HOUSE

The siege of Pavlov's House (named after Sergeant Yakov Pavlov, who contributed to its defence) cost the Germans dearly and became a symbol of the Red Army's will to resist. Having retaken the four-storey building from the Germans, the soldiers of the 13th Guards Division positioned machine guns in every window and ringed the building with barbed wire and mines. They also discovered that an anti-tank gun on the roof of the building was too high up for the German tanks to fire on.

Overlooking the Volga (from which supplies were brought to the house via a trench), the defenders had a clear view to the north, south and west for half a mile. From 27 September until 25 November they managed to repel waves of German assaults until they were relieved by reinforcements.

Following a summit with Hitler in his Vinnitsa headquarters, Paulus unleashed the next major assault on 12 September. With yet another artillery bombardment and bombing attack having pounded the city beforehand, the Wehrmacht began to make progress, fighting their way towards the Mamayev Kurgan, a mound overlooking the Volga, also known as Hill 102 on account of its height in metres. Soldiers pressed on to the railway station as Hoth's Panzer and infantry troops aimed for the grain elevator.

Stalin ordered that men be sent across the Volga to secure the west bank. The 13th Guards Division lined up to await the journey under German fire. Those that reached the bank leapt from the boats to rush the enemy, knowing that the slightest delay meant death. Close-quarter combat ensued as reinforcements poured in from both sides. The hill was strategically vital; its loss would allow the Germans to control the entire river, across which all of the Soviet supplies had to travel.

### FACTORIES OF DEATH

The further the Germans advanced the stiffer the resistance they encountered. Every single building had to be fought for, with numerous tales of grossly outnumbered men holding out against wave upon wave of attacks. One of the most well-known examples is Pavlov's House, which is said to have cost the Germans more men than the entire thrust into France. In such encounters flamethrowers proved very effective, but it was the snipers, such as the famed Vasily Zaitsev, that reigned supreme among the rubble. Appropriately, the German name for this merciless fighting was Rattenkrieg (Rat War).

By early October the Germans began their assault on the factory district to the north of the city. Many of these installations, including the Red October Complex and the Tractor Factory, had been turned into fortresses, and these changed hands many times as the battle ebbed

## TIMELINE

1942

#### BOMBING RAID

On the third anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Germans pulverise Stalingrad from the air, killing thousands of people.  
23 AUGUST 1942

#### WEHRMACHT ON THE VOLGA

Such is the ferocity of the German assault, Hitler's forces gaze out over the Volga (not the buildings that used to block the view of it) by sunset.  
23 AUGUST 1942

#### STALINGRAD-MOROZAST RAILWAY

The Germans press on, fighting bitterly to reach the key railway line, forcing the desperate Soviets back.  
31 AUGUST 1942

#### SOVIET COUNTER-ATTACK

The Soviets launch a doomed counter-attack in early September, gaining little ground but sparing the remnants of their 62nd and 64th armies from the German advance.  
SEPTEMBER 1942

#### FRESH GERMAN OFFENSIVE

Paulus begins a new offensive by pounding the city with artillery and aerial bombardments. His men then reach the Mamayev Kurgan.  
12 SEPTEMBER

#### FIGHTING IN THE FACTORIES

As the Germans continue their march further into the city they reach the industrial district. Fighting erupts as the Soviets struggle to hold key buildings, including the Tractor Factory.  
4 OCTOBER

#### BATTLE FOR THE MAMAYEV KURGAN

Aware that the loss of this strategically vital hill would hand the Germans total control of the Volga, Stalin orders troops be sent over to retake it. A bloody struggle for Hill 102 begins.  
12 SEPTEMBER ONWARDS



## THE BLOODIEST BATTLE IN HISTORY

and flowed. In some instances, the Panzers resorted to ramming the buildings to gain entry.

The key positions were finally in German hands come the end of October, but the price paid for them was nothing short of catastrophic. The last heave of the attack has been curtailed by a rain of Katyusha and mortar fire. Just as winter approached the Wehrmacht found itself running out of steam, bled almost dry.

A final attempt at a decisive breakthrough came on 11 November. As the Luftwaffe obliterated the factory chimneys, infantry seized buildings from the enemy, only to relinquish them shortly after. Burning tanks littered the streets as the Soviets dug in, some down to their last rounds. Such was their determination, a band of 15 men held off a thrust towards the petrol tanks on the Volga. The tenacity of these courageous men led the Germans to believe that they were fighting "creatures". And it would be these seemingly superhuman warriors that would soon wreak an almighty revenge.

Thanks to the movement of industry back beyond the Volga, Soviet factories were continuing to produce an immense amount of weaponry. Some estimates place monthly tank production, including the much-feared T-34, at 2,200. Hitler not only underestimated his enemy's industrial capacity, he also genuinely believed them to be exhausted and at the very end of their strength.

This hubris made the thunderclap of Operation Uranus all the more stunning. The supposedly spent Soviets had in fact been secretly amassing a gargantuan force with which to launch a staggeringly ambitious flanking attack of brutal simplicity. A main assault force would set off over 100 miles west of Stalingrad, while another horde of troops struck out from south of the Don River as an armoured thrust launched from the south of the charred city. On the morning of 19 November, a huge Soviet bombardment opened fire as the snow fell. The Germans, supported



Bombing raids and their attendant firestorms left Stalingrad a pulverised ruin, but the city fought on

by Italian and Romanian troops, didn't know what hit them. The encirclement of the 6th Army had begun, and it would culminate in its destruction. Hitler's refusal to allow Paulus' men to retreat, combined with Goering's insistence that the Luftwaffe could keep the entrapped soldiers supplied, cemented their doom. By the first days of February 1943, Stalingrad was silent.

The horrific battle for the city is the bloodiest in human history and bore witness to animalistic fighting. In the words of Winston Churchill, "Stalingrad was the end of the beginning". It proved to be a traumatic reversal from which the Wehrmacht never fully recovered. The Red Army would march for Berlin. With over two years of conflict ahead, the outcome of World War II had already been settled in the ruins of Stalin's city, the fate of Hitler's Third Reich permanently sealed.

### GERMANS ATTEMPT FINAL BREAKTHROUGH

Running out of supplies and shattered by the fighting, Paulus attempts to finally end the battle. The Germans force their way forwards, taking many buildings from the Soviets but failing to deliver a knockout blow.

11 NOVEMBER

### THE SNIPER MOVEMENT

As the anniversary of the October Revolution nears a cult of 'sniperism' begins to emerge, with Vasily Zaitsev at its head. Zaitsev, who killed 225 enemy soldiers during the battle, begins to train young snipers.

MID-OCTOBER

### THE FALL OF THE FACTORIES

After almost a month, the Germans finally have overall control of the area. However, Soviet defenders remain in the vicinity, with some of them even left inside the Tractor Factory.

LATE OCTOBER

### OPERATION URANUS

With approximately 1 million men amassed over 100 miles from Stalingrad, the Soviets begin a huge encirclement operation, hoping to trap the Germans in the city and out on the steppe.

19 NOVEMBER

### THE NET BEGINS TO CLOSE

Paulus is horrified to hear that the approaching Soviet forces now threaten both flanks of his 6th Army.

21 NOVEMBER

### A PANICKED WITHDRAWAL

Paulus swiftly abandons his headquarters as Soviet tanks approach. General Walther von Seydlitz orders two infantry divisions to burn their supplies and retreat from Stalingrad.

21 NOVEMBER

### HITLER DOOMS THE 6TH ARMY

With hope of a breakout fading fast, Hitler issues an order to the trapped 6th Army that, "Surrender is out of the question. Troops must fight on to the end."

22 JANUARY 1943

### THE 6TH ARMY SURRENDERS

Paulus' trapped forces begin to surrender. Approximately 91,000 troops are taken into captivity. Only 5,000 ever made it back to Germany.

31 JANUARY - 2 FEBRUARY 1943

1943





## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

# DEFENCE OF PAVLOV'S HOUSE

**AN UNDER-STRENGTH PLATOON OF SOVIET SOLDIERS DEFENDED STALINGRAD'S HOUSE OF HORRORS AGAINST OVERWHELMING WEHRMACHT NUMBERS**

**T**he Battle of Stalingrad is one of the most brutal battles in history and, for most historians, it is the crucial turning point of World War II. The German attempt to take the strategic city of Stalingrad on the Volga River turned into an apocalyptic bloodbath. It resulted in huge casualties and led to the eventual retreat and defeat of the Axis armies in the USSR. There were countless acts of heroism in the battle, but one of the most famous is the dogged, two-month-long Soviet resistance at 'Pavlov's House', a fortified apartment block in the centre of the city.

## THE CASUALTIES OF STALINGRAD

The Soviet victory in the Caucasus turned the tide of WWII but at a horrendous price for both sides

The Battle of Stalingrad ended in early February 1943, almost exactly ten years to the day that Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany in 1933. He had envisaged a Third Reich that would last for a thousand years, but after Stalingrad that dream sharply evaporated. The reason for this was the massive casualties incurred by the Germans during the battle. The Wehrmacht's 6th Army had originally been comprised of 285,000 soldiers. Of these men 165,000 had been killed and 29,000 had been wounded and evacuated. That left 91,000 men who were taken prisoner by the Soviets despite Hitler's refusal to allow the men to surrender. Most of these prisoners would not survive Soviet captivity. It is estimated that only 5,000 German troops escaped the carnage.

The Soviet casualties were even worse, with possibly 1 million fatalities, including nearly all the men that Stalin had committed to the early stages of the battle. However, the Soviet Union could replace these enormous losses, whereas the Germans could not. The loss of a complete army group and its equipment meant that the Germans could neither sustain their advance into Russia nor cope with the eventual Soviet counter-attack. Hitler was furious, and angrily recognised that, "The God of War has gone over to the other side."



### 1. THE GERMANS ATTACK AN APARTMENT BUILDING

On 23 September 1942, German soldiers attack a four-storey apartment block in the centre of Stalingrad. The building is parallel to the west bank of the Volga River and overlooks '9th January Square', a large public square that is named after the Bloody Sunday Massacre of 1905.

### 2. SERGEANT PAVLOV SEIZES THE BUILDING

When the apartment block is attacked, a platoon of Soviet soldiers from the 13th Guards Rifle Division is ordered to take and defend it. They are led by Sergeant Yakov Pavlov, a low-ranking NCO who is serving as the acting platoon commander as the unit's lieutenant and senior sergeants have all been killed or wounded. The assault on the building is successful, although only four men out of a 30-man platoon survive the attack.

### 3. PAVLOV STRIKES STRATEGIC GOLD

Pavlov surveys the situation and finds the house is strategically well placed for a defence. It is positioned on a cross street and gives the defenders a clear line of sight for over half a mile to the north, south and west of the city. After two days he is reinforced and resupplied, bringing his under-strength unit up to 25 men.

### 4. DIGGING IN

Joseph Stalin issues Order Number 227 to the troops in Stalingrad, "Not one step back." Pavlov takes this to heart and orders the building to be surrounded with four layers of barbed wire and minefields. He also sets up machine-gun posts in every available window facing the square as well as anti-tank rifles and mortars.

### 5. TANK DESTRUCTION FROM THE ROOF

Pavlov discovers that a PTRS-41 anti-tank rifle is very effective against German tanks when it is mounted on the roof. When tanks approach within 25 metres of the building, their thin turret armour becomes exposed to anti-tank fire from above but they are unable to elevate their weapons high enough to retaliate. Pavlov reportedly destroys almost a dozen tanks using this tactic.

### 6. INTERNAL LOGISTICS AND SUPPORT

In order to communicate properly, Pavlov's men breach the walls in the basement and upper floors of the building and also dig a communications trench to Soviet positions outside. Supplies are brought in via then trench or by boats crossing the Volga, despite German air raids and shelling.

### 7. A HARSH EXISTENCE

Despite the creation of the communications trench, the soldiers (and civilians who live in the basement) constantly suffer from a shortage of food and especially water. There are no beds and the soldiers try to sleep on insulation wool torn off pipes.

### 8. A RELENTLESS BOMBARDMENT

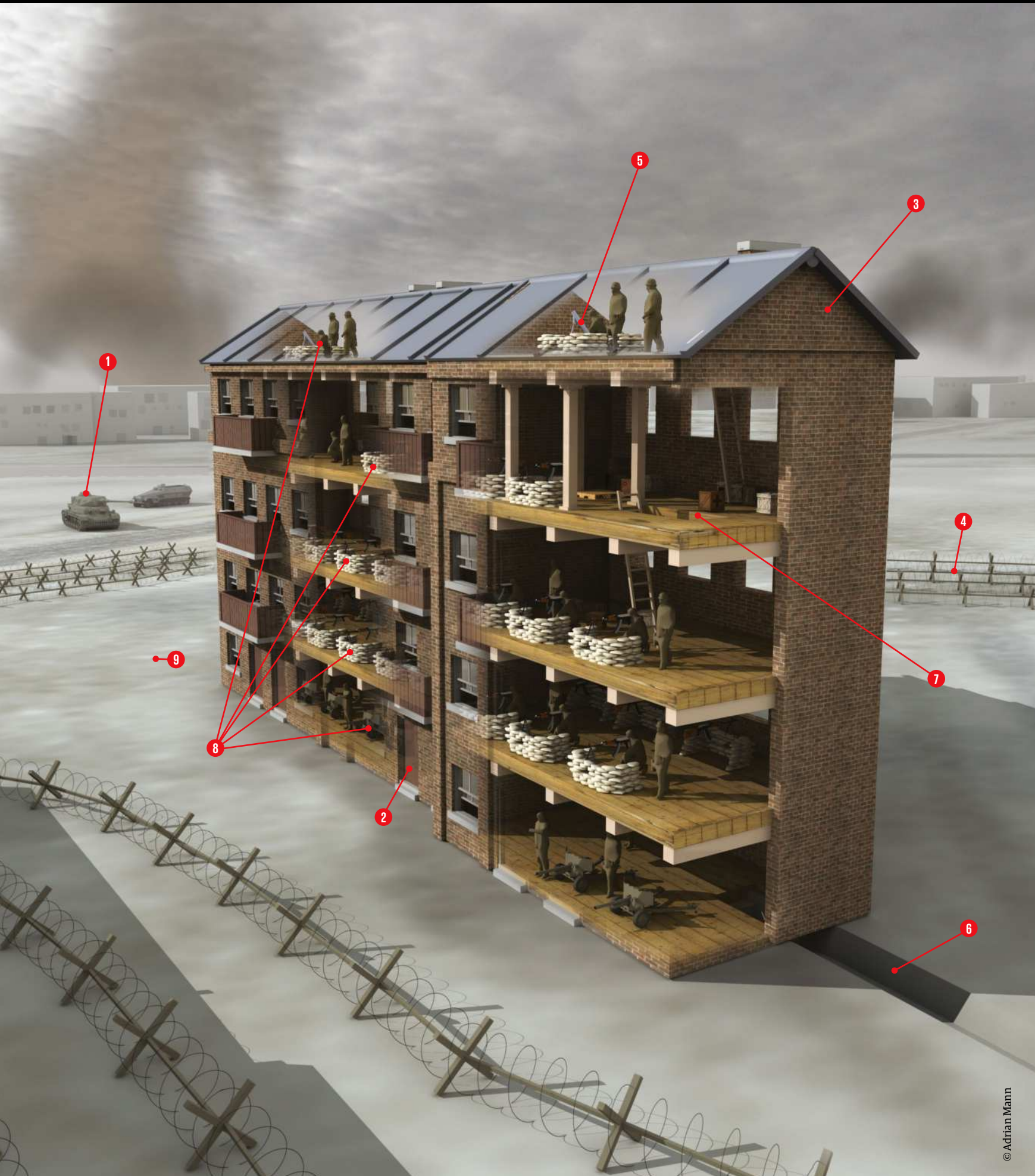
The Germans continually shoot at the building day and night but each time soldiers or tanks cross the square to close in Pavlov's men unleash a hail of machine-gun and anti-tank fire from the basement, windows and roof top, inflicting large casualties and forcing the Germans to retreat.

### 9. A GRIM TACTIC?

By mid-November Pavlov's men reportedly use the lulls in fighting to run out and kick over-heaped piles of German corpses so that they are not used as cover for the next round of attackers. Whatever the truth, the defenders hold out until they are relieved by Soviet counter-attacks on 25 November 1942.



## DEFENCE OF PAVLOV'S HOUSE







THE BEGINNING OF THE END

# SNIPERS OF THE EASTERN FRONT

Meet the patient sharpshooters  
who delivered death from afar

WRITTEN BY SCOTT REEVES



Few fighters spread fear like the sniper. No soldier can let his guard down while the risk remains that an unseen enemy is hiding, waiting for a moment of weakness. Many a soldier's life ended without ever hearing the crack of the rifle that killed them.

Snipers proved to be particularly valuable on the Eastern Front. The Soviets were fighting a desperate defensive action, and a single well-placed sniper could pin down dozens of invaders. The Germans thought the best way to eliminate their cold-blooded adversaries was with their own ruthless assassins. The best snipers became heroes - feted by their own side, hated by the enemy.

Marksmen on both sides searched for high-value targets through their scopes. To take out a commanding officer was to decapitate a unit, leaving it leaderless and confused. Snipers also knew the value of fear. A bullet to the stomach usually led to a slow, agonising death for the victim, but it also devastated morale among their comrades.

Thousands of soldiers on the Eastern Front were given a rifle, scope and orders to kill. Some lasted only days before they faced their own mortality, but a select few were responsible for the deaths of hundreds.

The five-month Battle of Stalingrad provided a perfect hunting ground for snipers on both sides





## SNIPERS OF THE EASTERN FRONT

### MATTHÄUS HETZENAUER

**ALLEGIANCE:**  
Nazi Germany

**LENGTH OF SERVICE:**  
1943-1945

**KILLS:**  
345

**B**orn in a small village in the Austrian Alps, Hetzenauer learned his deadly trade hunting deer in the hills. Officers identified Hetzenauer's excellent marksmanship after he was drafted into the Wehrmacht at the age of 17, and he was quickly transferred to sniper school.

Hetzenauer was unleashed in the Carpathians in August 1944 with orders to protect mountain artillery units from the advancing Red Army. Almost every day the Germans came under attack from Soviet guns. Hetzenauer slipped away from the lines to find a nest from which he could take out any officers who were unfortunate enough to draw his attention. During one Soviet assault, Hetzenauer was responsible for the death of eight different company commanders, throwing the attack into confusion.

Hetzenauer stayed in position throughout the daylight hours, looking to take particular advantage at dawn and dusk when enemy soldiers were more careless and exposed themselves to his telescopic sight. During ten months at the front, Hetzenauer made 345 confirmed kills – more than one a day. He was also on the receiving end, suffering a head wound during an artillery barrage. Only capture by the Red Army in May 1945 brought the most prolific Axis sniper's reign of terror to an end.



### LYUDMILA PAVLICHENKO

**ALLEGIANCE:** Soviet Union  
**LENGTH OF SERVICE:** 1941-1953  
**KILLS:** 309

**P**avlichenko rushed to join up when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. She rejected the recruiting officer's suggestion that she become a nurse and insisted that she become a sniper due to her childhood years on the shooting range.

Any hesitation that Pavlichenko might have had in taking another life evaporated when a fellow soldier was shot as he hid in her sniper's nest at the Siege of Odessa. "After that, nothing could stop me," Pavlichenko later wrote. She got the first of her kills later that day when she shot two German scouts. During the next two months Pavlichenko claimed more than 100 other victims. After Axis troops overran Odessa, Pavlichenko was withdrawn and sent to a second city under siege: Sevastopol.

The Germans feared the enemy they named Lady Death. Wehrmacht snipers were despatched to take her out, but Pavlichenko was successful in 36 tense duels. Some lasted for days until her opponent made a false move. Pavlichenko was pulled from the front line after being hit by shrapnel, but the Germans still wanted revenge. They broadcast messages over loudspeakers threatening to tear her into 309 pieces after they captured the city. "They even know my score!" the delighted sniper exclaimed.







## THE BEGINNING OF THE END



### VASILY ZAITSEV

**ALLEGIANCE:** Soviet Union  
**LENGTH OF SERVICE:** 1937-1945  
**KILLS:** 225

Z

aitsev was serving as a clerk in the Pacific Fleet on the far side of Russia when Germany invaded. He requested a front-line posting and arrived in time for the Battle of Stalingrad. It was a wise move. Zaitsev killed 32 enemy soldiers with a standard-issue rifle, and his kill count increased further after he was given a sniper rifle and optical sight.

Zaitsev excelled amid the burned-out buildings of Stalingrad. In two bloody months he killed 225 enemy soldiers from concealed positions. As his reputation grew, Zaitsev was given command of multiple snipers and told to defend several open areas. He developed a strategy in which three snipers worked together from three different positions, each supported by an observer.

Posthumous Hollywood fame came in 2001 with the release of *Enemy at the Gates*, a film based on a sniper duel between Zaitsev and the head of a German sniper school brought to Stalingrad to eliminate the Soviet sniper. Whether this exact duel took place is debated by historians, although Zaitsev is credited with killing 11 German snipers. A mortar attack damaged his eyesight, but the Hero of the Soviet Union recovered sufficiently to return to the front line in 1945.

### IVAN SIDORENKO

**ALLEGIANCE:** Soviet Union  
**LENGTH OF SERVICE:** 1939-1945  
**KILLS:** 500

I

Hitler wasn't the only art school dropout of World War II. Sidorenko left his studies at Penza Art College in 1939 to enlist in the Red Army. By 1941 he was sneaking away from his artillery unit to kill Germans as a self-taught sniper. Sidorenko's voluntary missions soon caught the eye of his superiors, and he was tasked with passing on his expertise to others, eventually teaching more than 250 recruits on the Baltic Front. He even allowed novice snipers to shadow him on the front line – on-the-job training had never been so dangerous.

Snipers didn't just target people. When Sidorenko spotted a German motor convoy during the Battle of Moscow, he quickly loaded his rifle with incendiary bullets. After a few precise shots the Germans fled, minus a destroyed tank and three tractors. One man had single-handedly sent dozens of Wehrmacht soldiers scurrying to safety.

In three years Sidorenko reportedly killed 500 enemy combatants, making him the Soviet Union's deadliest sniper. His tally only stopped rising after a wound suffered in Estonia left him hospitalised and his superiors decided that Sidorenko's value as a teacher was greater than his kills on the front line.





## SNIPERS OF THE EASTERN FRONT



### FYODOR OKHLOPKOV

**ALLEGIANCE:** Soviet Union  
**LENGTH OF SERVICE:** 1941-1945  
**KILLS:** 429



An ethnic Yakut born in the eastern USSR and orphaned at the age of five, Okhlopkov eventually escaped the poverty of his home village when he was conscripted into the army in 1941 and became a machine gunner. He was identified as a potential sniper in late 1942 when his unit was rebuilt following a bloody month in which 80 per cent were killed or wounded.

Perhaps more than any other sniper, Okhlopkov demonstrated a range of skills. Aside from sniping, he continued to take shifts in the machine-gun nests and wielded an anti-tank rifle. Whereas many snipers were kept away from danger once their kill count and propaganda value rose, Okhlopkov was allowed to go on hazardous reconnaissance patrols behind enemy lines. Perhaps that was why he was wounded 12 separate times, the final injury being a chest wound that kept him out of action for nine months.

Despite being credited with 429 kills with his sniper rifle – never mind many more with a machine gun – Okhlopkov's recommendation for the title of Hero of the Soviet Union was downgraded to the Order of the Red Banner. Only on the 20th anniversary of Victory Day was he finally granted the title routinely given to snipers from the western republics.

### JOSEF ALLERBERGER

**ALLEGIANCE:** Nazi Germany  
**LENGTH OF SERVICE:** 1942-1945  
**KILLS:** 257



A compatriot of Hetzenauer in the 3rd Mountain Division, Allerberger discovered he had a sniper's eye while experimenting with a captured Soviet rifle. His first kill came when he took out a Soviet sniper who was pinning down German troops. Allerberger patiently identified his position by showing a dummy target, then settled down to shoot from between two tree stumps. When German observers rushed out to confirm the kill, they discovered that Allerberger had shot his opponent through his right eye.

The 19-year-old self-taught sniper made 23 confirmed kills before being sent for formal training. Upon his return to the Eastern Front, Allerberger proved himself on more than one occasion. In one encounter at Balakovo, Allerberger despatched 18 female snipers who were shooting at German positions from vantage points in trees. Allerberger identified their positions by spotting which tree branches shook and cleared them within an hour.

Allerberger also stopped an attack headed by three T-34 tanks when the officer commanding the lead tank made the mistake of lifting his hatch a few inches and peeking out. Allerberger pressed the trigger and the officer slumped back amid a red spray. The tanks quickly turned and headed for home, carrying another victim of the Third Reich's second-deadliest sniper.







**THE BEGINNING OF THE END**

# **"I FELT NO PITY" INTERVIEW WITH A FEMALE SOVIET SNIPER**

Yulia Zhukova was one of the Red Army's unique sharpshooters who fought on the Eastern Front during World War II

**WRITTEN BY TOM GARNER**





## INTERVIEW WITH A FEMALE SOVIET SNIPER

**D**uring World War II over 800,000 women served in the armed forces of the Soviet Union. Although most acted as medics or nurses, many also served as combatants. Their roles ranged from pilots and tank crew members to machine-gunners, but female personnel were also formidable snipers. The most famous female sniper of the war, Lyudmila Pavlichenko, was credited with 309 kills in a relatively short period between August 1941 and June 1942. This included 36 enemy snipers, and her total tally made her one of the deadliest snipers in military history. As Pavlichenko explained, "We mowed down Hitlerites like ripe grain."

Because of the success of individual sharpshooters like Pavlichenko, women were officially approved to be

trained as snipers in December 1942. From May 1943 recruits were trained at what eventually became known as the Central Women's Sniper School.

By the end of the war 1,885 female snipers had graduated from this institution into the Red Army. Between them these indomitable soldiers were crack shots who achieved approximately 10,000-12,000 kills.

Nevertheless, these women fought in horrendous conditions across the Eastern Front and many were killed, either in combat or in gruesome circumstances if they were captured by vengeful German forces. One of those who survived was Junior Sergeant Yulia Konstantinovna Zhukova.

Aged only 18 when she joined the Red Army, Zhukova saw extensive action during the Soviet advance into East Prussia between November 1944 and May 1945. She was

**Below Snipers take  
aim on the Kalinin  
Front, 1 July 1943**







## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

still in her teens when her military service ended and is now a highly decorated veteran.

Zhukova recalls in vivid detail her short, sharp military career, from trench combat and killing the enemy to advancing into hostile territory and enduring some of the worst conditions of World War II. Most importantly, it is a unique perspective of a patriotic woman determinedly fighting in a warzone dominated by the brutality of men.

### "THE WILL TO VICTORY"

Born in February 1926 in Uralsk (now Oral, Kazakhstan), Zhukova clearly remembers the day the Soviet Union went to war with Nazi Germany.

"I shall never forget 22 June 1941. It was a magnificent day - fine, warm and sunny and we had just completed our schooling. We had gathered near our school to see off one of our friends on vacation when a woman came up with tears in her eyes. She said, 'Children, where are you off to? The war's started!'. Her words seemed so absurd that we didn't pay any attention. Of course, we were not aware how serious the war was, what a tragedy it would be for our country and how many lives it would cost. I was confident that we would be victorious, but at home it was all gloom and tears."

Zhukova came from a staunchly patriotic Soviet family, and she initially volunteered to work in an engineering factory to assist the war effort. Working in harsh conditions, she was hospitalised with typhus but was still determined to join the Red Army.

"I found out that there were two-week courses in basic military training for girls in Uralsk and decided it was to time to attend them. The young generation really wanted to help our country overcome the Nazis. Due to this training I was able to join the Red Army as a volunteer, although I was still under 18. Along with a few other girls from Uralsk who had been called up, I was directed to the Central Women's Sniping School."

**Right Zhukova holding her new sniper rifle while her comrade Lyuba Ruzhitskaya poses with binoculars, June 1944**



**Below This pictured example of a Mosin-Nagant sniper rifle was manufactured in Izhevsk in 1943. The telescopic sight is a PEM calibre rather than the usual PU**

# MOSIN-NAGANT RIFLE

**RED ARMY SNIPERS USED A DURABLE WEAPON THAT WAS INITIALLY DESIGNED IN THE 19TH CENTURY BUT WAS STILL THE BEST WEAPON FOR MARKSMEN ON THE EASTERN FRONT**





## INTERVIEW WITH A FEMALE SOVIET SNIPER



Located at Silikatnaya near Podolsk, the school was run by Captain Nora Pavlovna Chegodaieva, and Zhukova was part of a draft that trained between April and November 1944. She was the youngest recruit and her training was extremely thorough.

"Every day we were drilled, taught to march and perform the necessary techniques with a rifle. We were supposed to know the Red Army regulations and the ins and outs of all types of firearms - rifles, pistols, and both machine guns and sub-machine guns. We were taught how to set up fox-holes, camouflage ourselves, crawl on our elbows and sit in hideouts for lengthy periods."

The sniper training in particular was highly detailed. "It was shooting, shooting and more shooting. There were special exercises to improve our powers of observation and memory, sharpen our vision and develop firmness of hand. We fired at targets from full, waist and chest height - at both moving and stationary targets, open and camouflaged. We fired standing, lying and kneeling, with and without support for the rifle, on the move and standing still. A whole day of running, crawling and shooting took so much energy that you just wanted to drop and go to sleep."

As well as the rigorous practical training, patriotism was further instilled into the already keen women. "This was a 'Patriotic War' and young and old people all combatted the invaders. Patriotic education was another side of the cadets' training. In the classroom we were constantly reminded of the country's heroic past, the fighting traditions of both the Russian and Red Armies and we were told about the current exploits of our soldiers. Historical films were also regularly shown in the school's club. Pride for the country, aspiration and the will to victory were brought up in us."

### "UNBELIEVABLY TAXING" COMBAT

Zhukova was among 559 female snipers aged 18 to 23

who graduated in her draft, and she was deployed to join 611th Rifle Regiment on the Eastern Front in November 1944, a part of the 88th Rifle Division. The regiment had been in action since the beginning of the war, fought its way through central Russia and Byelorussia (Belarus) and had a heroic reputation.

611th had been encircled only a month before Zhukova's arrival, when one of its sergeants had posthumously been made a 'Hero of the Soviet Union' for successfully protecting the regimental banner.

When the new detachment of snipers arrived at the regiment's position after a long journey, Zhukova and her fellow graduates came under fire almost immediately.

"Hot soup was served and we swiftly started eating. At that moment, a mortar attack began. From fear, we abandoned everything. This included our mess tins and rifles, and we dashed down to the cellar.

"We later finished the now cold soup and cursed the Germans. It was embarrassing to have left our weapons behind and this never happened again. The soldiers laughed and claimed that the Germans had specially arranged this 'salute' in honour of our arrival."

Now fighting in wintry, defensive trenches as a junior sergeant, Zhukova worked closely alongside the other soldiers in her unit. "We were very close and helped each other, whether it be a female or male comrade. It was normal for us to go fighting in pairs. While one of us observed the surrounding territory with binoculars, the other would be looking through the rifle's optic. Then we would change places."

Just before New Year 1945, Zhukova killed her first German soldier. She remembers her unease at what had happened. "I was congratulated by my superior but I was overcome by a complex set of emotions that day.

"I was glad to have opened my wartime tally, but when you kill a human being, even an enemy, you feel uneasy. I remember feeling slightly nauseous and shivery that

Known in the West as the 'Mosin-Nagant', Zhukova's principal weapon was the Obr. 1891/30-type infantry rifle. By WWII, the Mosin-Nagant Model was an old design that had been first adopted in 1891. It was updated by the Soviets to include a telescopic sight for snipers from 1931 and gained a reputation for its simplicity and high reliability.

Other rifles, such as the Mauser Kar. 98k, would seize up in the often freezing conditions of the Eastern Front.

By contrast the Mosin-Nagant would always work even in temperatures as low as -30 degrees Celsius. Snipers also benefitted from the PU telescope sight, which had higher-quality lenses than the Germans, whose sight adjuster drums could jam in the extreme cold.

Zhukova largely praises the Mosin-Nagant, although she reveals that it was far from faultless. "As soon as we learned to handle our weapons more or less tolerably, our ordinary rifles were replaced by snipers' models

with the telescopic sights. We all instantly appreciated the advantages of these new weapons, which would accompany us to the front.

"The Mosin sniper rifle was perfect for point shots at long-range single targets with a telescopic sight providing a range of up to 1,300 metres. However, the design of the optical sight meant that you could only insert one cartridge at a time. Therefore the responsibility of each sniper's shot was dramatically increased."







## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

evening and did not want to think about the dead man. Then it all passed.

"I saw so many evil things committed by the Nazis that I felt no pity for those I killed. It is frightening to admit it but wiping out an enemy became just a job, a duty which had to be well performed. Otherwise, they would kill you."

With 611th Zhukova became embroiled in the savage fighting conditions on the Eastern Front. "I experienced being both on the offensive and defensive and fully knowing the bitterness of retreat and being encircled for many days at a time. I endured bombing raids and both artillery and mortar fire.

"I froze in the snows of no-man's-land tracking down a target to hit and getting soaked to the skin in the Masurian Lakes of northeast Poland for the same reason. I cared for the wounded and, in the heat of battle, gave blood for them. I made and lost friends, spent time in hospital, escaped death by a miracle and was almost captured by the enemy."

Such intense, often terrifying experiences were crammed into a very short space of time. "Physical stress, challenges to morale, cold, hunger, chronic lack of sleep, and the filth of life in the trenches - all this is part of war. And for me, it was all compressed into several unbelievably taxing months."

Fighting the Soviet troops all the way were the Germans, whose hatred of the Soviets was geared towards genocide. "German soldiers were determined, ruthless, savage and firmly convinced of the rightness of their cause. The ideology of the Nazis was not just to completely eliminate Jews but also Russians. Thousands of villages and hundreds of cities were ruined and civilians were tortured and killed by the Germans just for nothing."

Zhukova was acutely aware that as a female sniper she was particularly vulnerable to German brutality. "To give you an example of how it was, Tatyana Baramzina graduated from our sniper school and was decorated [posthumously] as a Hero of the Soviet Union, which was the highest commendation for heroic action. She fought the Nazis for at least an hour while defending a bunker with wounded soldiers.

"The Germans caught her, tortured her, gouged out her eyes and she was then shot with an anti-tank gun. The wounded soldiers in the bunker were then all killed."

### "BULLETS WERE FLYING AT ME"

From January 1945, the 88th Rifle Division went on the offensive into East Prussia with 611th Rifle Regiment advancing in the first echelon. Before entering Prussian territory, the Soviet troops were given strict instructions.

"We were lined up and an order was read that threatened the most severe punishments, including the firing squad, for looting or taking the law into our own hands. We did not set up concentration camps, burn people in ovens, take children from their mothers or enslave people as the Germans did with us."

**Right German machine-gunners await a Soviet attack in East Prussia, 1945. Zhukova describes the German soldiers as "determined, ruthless, savage and firmly convinced of the rightness of their cause"**

**Below Red Army troops pictured while engaged in street fighting in Königsberg, East Prussia, April 1945**





## INTERVIEW WITH A FEMALE SOVIET SNIPER



Nevertheless these orders were often ignored. "Sometimes our soldiers did not follow the instructions. Those who had lost their homes and had their families killed by the Germans were furious with them. There was very heavy fighting in East Prussia, which was a loyal bulwark to the Nazi regime and they fought to the end. When the war was over, I recall that they were still shooting at us from around corners, attics or woods."

After taking Lidzbark Warminski, Poland, 611th advanced towards Górowo Iławeckie, where heavy fighting occurred on the approaches. The Red Army took the town but Zhukova's unit became encircled for nine days inside Landsberg. "It seemed to me as if the bullets were flying straight at me. Some days we had to fight off six to eight German attacks. Everyone who was capable held weapons in the trenches, including wounded or sick soldiers. The artillerymen pulled their guns up to the front line and beat the Germans at direct fire, but when they fired their last shells they also came into the trenches."

Fearing capture, Zhukova made desperate preparations. "I put two spare cartridges in my pocket for myself just in case the Germans got their hands on me."

"We were more afraid of captivity than death because we had seen more than once what the fascists were doing to the prisoners."



The German blockade was eventually broken by Soviet reinforcements. "We cried, laughed and rocked the soldiers who came to our aid and saved hundreds of lives. Winning was never easy though because many soldiers died to break through to us."

Although Zhukova ultimately crossed the whole of Prussia with her division, she and her fellow female snipers were sent back to tend to wounded soldiers in various medical centres. After then joining a reserve regiment, she was herself hospitalised after a small wound became seriously infected. Zhukova almost lost her right leg, but after a painful period of recovery she was assigned to the Alexander Nevsky Howitzer Regiment.

Now separated from her fellow snipers, Zhukova worked in relative safety as a telephonist for the last month of the war at divisional headquarters. She was also the only woman in her regiment and was largely protected by her attentive male counterparts.

"I was surrounded and supported by the male soldiers. As the only woman in the regiment, I shared their







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trenches, sleeping areas, tents or hospital rooms. After the war I received three letters from my soldier friends speaking of their love and with marriage proposals."

Nevertheless, despite many of her male comrades' affections and protection, Zhukova was not entirely free from the risk of unwanted sexual advances. "Of course, there were other cases. I was molested by a few officers but was fortunately able to escape being raped. There was often a feeling that the war had ruined all moral barriers, including those between men and women. This was because we were all really on the eve of being killed, sooner or later."

The horrors of the war, both on and off the battlefield, meant that the German surrender on 9 May 1945 was greeted with great celebration. "We all picked up our weapons and ran into the street. There were hugs, tears, laughter and random shooting in the air. Gunners gave several powerful volleys towards the Baltic Sea and accordion music began improvised dances. This was the long-awaited 'Victory' with a capital 'V', because this was a great victory of the whole people, who had paid very dearly for it."

### THE COST OF WAR

Zhukova returned home to Uralsk and was discharged from the Red Army in August 1945. She is highly decorated for her wartime service and her awards include two medals 'For Bravery', the Order of the Great War for the Fatherland (2nd Class) and the Marshal Zhukov Medal. For her services on the Home Front before military service Zhukova was also awarded the Order of the Badge of Honour and a medal 'For Valour on the Labour Front'.

As a sniper, Zhukova's total 'score' comprised of eight dead soldiers, although she explains that the real tally was almost certainly higher.

"How is one supposed to count them? When we were encircled at Landsberg, we fired and fired for days until our eyes grew dark. I kept firing along with the soldiers beside me and the machine guns. How can you calculate how many fell from your bullets?"

"My eight [confirmed] victims represent what was confirmed by observers and, basically, they were targets destroyed on orders."

After the war Zhukova graduated from the Moscow Pedagogical Institute and had a successful career as a secondary school director and mid-level leader in the Communist Party for educational development in Moscow. She attributes her leadership skills to her wartime service, although she was also traumatised by her experiences.

"For the first 30 years or so after the war I had regular nightmares about running, shooting, being shot at and mines exploding around me. Most of all, I was afraid of falling into enemy hands in my dreams. But, in most cases, a sniper has sole responsibility for his or her decisions. They have the right for just one shot as the

second one could be for them. It developed my leadership skills and helped me to overcome many post-war difficulties. I did not talk about my past for a long time, but people possibly felt a strength inside me and accepted my leadership."

Today the Great Patriotic War is still widely commemorated throughout Russia. On 9 May each year people from across the country take part in 'Immortal Regiment' processions. "The war is still in the memory of our people. There were so many losses - 27 million or so died - and in the USSR there is almost no family who did not lose someone. Thousands come out on the street carrying photos of veterans who died or survived the war. The people are proud of their ancestry and, today, I am proud of our people."

Having experienced some of the worst atrocities in human history as a teenager, Zhukova remains concerned for today's younger generation, particularly with regards to international relations between the West and Russia.

"The Great Patriotic War was a deadly battle for the existence of my multinational country. Nowadays, young people can travel freely around the world and work, learn or go on vacations in the West. There are many economic links and we have started knowing each other better than before. It is foolish to even think that Russia will attack someone in the West. However, increased separation and further armament may easily destroy that mutual understanding. More and more young people join the 'Immortal Regiment' to demonstrate their attachment to their homeland and this has to be taken into consideration by those who oppose our rapprochement."

**Zhukova (central row, second right) with the rest of her squad in training, August 1944. She is seated next to Sergeant Masha Duvanova (centre)**



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**THE BEGINNING OF THE END**



# **ZHUKOV'S SCYTHES OF VENGEANCE**

A resurgent Red Army encircled the German 6th Army at Stalingrad and altered the course of the war on the Eastern Front

**WRITTEN BY MARC DESANTIS**



## ZHUKOV'S SCYTHES OF VENGEANCE



General Georgy Zhukov was the mastermind of Uranus, the November 1942 operation that saw the destruction of the German 6th Army

**B**arbarossa had failed. The 1941 German invasion, Adolf Hitler's bid to conquer the Soviet Union, had been repulsed at the very gates of Moscow that December by a renewed Red Army composed of fresh divisions drawn from Siberia. Overextended, the Germans held back the ferocious Soviet counteroffensive across the brutal winter of 1941-42, with the Luftwaffe resupplying some 75,000 German troops encircled in the Demyansk Pocket. The Eastern Front stabilised by spring 1942, and despite the heavy losses inflicted on them by the Soviets, the strategic initiative at the beginning of the 1942 campaigning season still lay squarely with the German invaders.

Neither Josef Stalin, the ruthless Soviet leader, nor Stavka, the USSR's High Command, anticipated that the upcoming German offensive for 1942 would strike in the south. Instead, they foresaw that the main blow would again fall on Moscow, in the central part of the Eastern Front, just as it had in the previous year.

Hitler, however, whose view of war was heavily coloured by economic thinking, had set his sights on the oilfields of the Caucasus as the primary objective of 1942. The oil obtained from them would be crucial to the German war machine.

The 1942 German offensive, codenamed Operation Blau, began on 28 June. German Army Group A would head for the Caucasian oil wells, while Army Group B would take control of territory up to the line of the southern Volga River.

The Germans rushed forward, seizing huge tracts of Russian territory. However, relatively few Soviet prisoners were taken on this occasion compared to the enormous captures of the previous year. Having learned a bitter lesson in 1941, the Soviets were withdrawing, careful to avoid being encircled by Hitler's surging Panzer spearheads.

Soon the Germans had reached the Volga River, beside which sat the industrial city of Stalingrad, and their Panzers were rolling into the Caucasus. The Germans, however, were spread very thinly in the vastness of the south Russian steppe. All told, German Army Group B found itself occupying a frontage some 400 miles in length, and the forces available to it were woefully insufficient to guard it effectively.

### SETTING THE TRAP

The Soviets spotted an opportunity. This was the genesis of Uranus, a military operation that would alter the course

of the war on the Eastern Front. General Georgy Zhukov and the Red Army's chief of the general staff, General Aleksandr Vasilevsky, met with Stalin on 12 September, not long before the German 6th Army was about to begin its first assault on Stalingrad. At the meeting, Zhukov had to account for the failures of several assaults against Axis positions north of Stalingrad. Zhukov explained that the attacks had not been supplemented with enough tanks and artillery. He asked for more troops, including many more tanks, howitzers and warplanes.

Stalin considered the request but was not convinced to the point of granting it. He told Zhukov and Vasilevsky to come up with a more detailed plan. The next day, the two generals returned with an audacious proposal. Stalingrad was to be held by as few soldiers (from the Soviet 62nd Army) as required to keep the Germans tied down in its streets. In the meantime, powerful Soviet armies would be assembled for a major counteroffensive. When the necessary preparations had been completed, two pincers would strike at the weak Axis flanks to the north and south of the city.

The intuition of the Soviet planners was sound. As it would turn out, as the Germans became evermore stuck in the quagmire of Stalingrad, responsibility for flank security either side of the city was delegated to their less-effective Romanian and Italian allies. Such soldiers would prove to be nowhere near as formidable opponents as their German allies.

Each Soviet pincer was to break through a sector

held by Romanian troops of indifferent combat strength. They would then meet on the far side of Stalingrad, trapping the German 6th Army in a giant encirclement. Out of supplies and with no reinforcements, the invaders would wither and die.

Stalin recommended that the attacks begin closer to either side of Stalingrad. This way, he reasoned, the pincers would not have to travel as

far to link up to complete the encirclement. Zhukov, however, pointed out that if the Soviet forces started out nearer to Stalingrad, the 6th Army troops there would have an easier time redeploying to parry the twin Soviet thrusts.

Presented with this cogent counterargument, Stalin consented to the nascent plan, codenamed Uranus. Meeting again on 28 September, the trio discussed a more fully developed battle plan. The northern pincer force would be the more powerful of the pair because it would have to traverse a longer distance than the southern. Also, the Romanian 3rd Army in the northern sector was backed up by German 4th Panzer Corps, a formation of

**"THE GERMANS HAD REACHED THE VOLGA RIVER, BESIDE WHICH SAT THE INDUSTRIAL CITY OF STALINGRAD, AND THEIR PANZERS WERE ROLLING INTO THE CAUCASUS"**





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considerable combat power, so more troops would be needed to deal with the enemy in this area.

Zhukov also realised that it would simply not do to hurl half-trained Red Army conscripts against the battle-hardened Germans. To ensure that the men to be committed to Uranus would know their jobs, he sent his green units to other sectors of the Eastern Front to be blooded in real combat.

The Germans were distracted by these movements of troops, since their presence signalled Soviet designs on other parts of the front, not the Stalingrad area. Ironically, the Soviets would also benefit from the ineffectual nature of the attacks that they had made against the Germans north of the city earlier in the year. Their repeated failures had convinced their opponents that the Red Army could not possibly carry out an operation of the power that Operation Uranus would display.

### THE SOVIETS MUSTER

To carry out this daring encirclement, a new 'front', as the Soviets termed a group of their armies, was formed. Under the command of General Nikolai Vatutin, the Southwest Front was composed of the 5th Tank Army, 1st Guards Army and the 21st Army. It would form the northern pincer.

General Konstantin Rokossovsky was placed in command the Don Front, a force that held a stretch of the line running northward from Stalingrad. Included in the Don Front were the 24th, 65th and 66th armies.

Stalingrad itself, and the line running southward from it, was held by Stalingrad Front under General Andrei Yeremenko. His task was to oversee the southern pincer movement of the 51st and 57th armies.

The Soviets went to great lengths to hide their upcoming operation. Their term for their deception effort was 'maskirovka' (disguise), and this encompassed camouflage, deception, disguise and extensive operational security measures. Russian misdirection resulted in Luftwaffe aeroplanes paying attention to 17 fake bridges thrown over the Don River so that they would miss the five genuine structures to be used by Vatutin's Southwest Front when Uranus began.

While preparations for Uranus ran their course, the Red Army's wireless traffic volume in the region was purposefully lowered to lull the Germans into believing that nothing was amiss. Additionally, much Soviet movement was conducted at night. Yeremenko's Stalingrad Front actually moved more than 160,000 troops and over 14,000 tanks and other vehicles over the southern Volga River during the darkness. By morning, each group of newly inserted troops was heavily camouflaged to escape detection by German reconnaissance units.

All in all, though the maskirovka did not hide Soviet preparations completely, it did shield the size of the forces that were being built up to the north and south

### PRISONERS OF STALIN

**Axis prisoners endured dreadful conditions in Soviet captivity**

*Around 235,000 German and Axis soldiers were taken prisoner by the victorious Soviets over the bleak winter of 1942-43, either during December's abortive German relief attempt, Operation Wintergewitter, or upon the fall of the Stalingrad cauldron in February. The once-invincible Germans who walked into captivity were painted by one observer as "ghosts in rags". Lice-ridden, thirsting, famished and freezing, thousands were forced to undertake death marches in which many perished in the snow.*

*Other men were trundled by rail to over 20 prisoner-of-war camps. Aboard one train on its way to Uzbekistan, many soldiers were driven mad by hunger and beat one another to death for the meagre scraps of food that their captors flung among them.*

*Once at the camps, German soldiers were beset ever further by bottomless hunger. Cannibalism, that ancient and horrific crime of desperation, emerged as a result. Pieces of frozen human flesh were plopped into boiling water and then passed around as 'camel meat'.*

*Survival among the prisoners proved to be largely a matter of rank. Ordinary enlisted men perished in droves, with 95 per cent of their number dying. Among junior officers, that percentage fell to 55 per cent, while those of higher rank, the senior officers of the 6th Army, saw only five per cent of their number die.*

*These men had eaten relatively well in the final days in Stalingrad prior to surrender, whereas the common soldiers had long been subsisting on a near-starvation diet. The Soviets also treated the higher German officers better, thus improving their odds of living through the ordeal of captivity.*

*Some German troops were not sent off from Stalingrad but were instead kept in place to help rebuild. Typhus, however, tore through the ruins of the gutted city, felling many of those who had remained.*

*There would be few happy stories among those who became prisoners of the Soviets. Most would die as prisoners, never seeing their distant homelands again.*

of Stalingrad and therefore obscured the titanic scope of Uranus. This was a remarkable achievement, as the pending operation was indeed gigantic. For Uranus, the Soviets gathered around 1.1 million troops, almost 900 tanks, over 13,000 artillery pieces and more than 1,100 aircraft.

### URANUS BEGINS

The great Uranus offensive began at 7.30am on 19 November with a massive artillery barrage that lasted for over an hour. When the guns fell silent, Soviet forces of the Don and Southwest fronts roared into battle along a 200-mile stretch of snow-covered ground. Bursting out of the Don River bridgehead at Serafimovich, Vatutin's 5th Tank Army of Southwest Front smashed into the Romanian 3rd Army's left flank, while its companion, the Soviet 1st Guards Army, took on the Italian 8th Army.

At the same time, the Soviet 21st Army surged out of the Don River bridgehead at Kletskeya and struck the Romanian 3rd Army in its right flank. The stunned Romanians were poorly equipped and unready to meet the Soviet onslaught. The Russians quickly ploughed through them. Meanwhile, Rokossovsky's 24th and 66th armies of Don Front went on the attack in the gap between the Volga and Don rivers.

The debut of Uranus fixed German eyes squarely on the northern sector, and General Friedrich Paulus, the 6th Army's commander in Stalingrad, was ordered by Army Group B, 6th Army's parent formation, to send his Panzer units west to protect his supply lines. Now the forces of Yeremenko's Stalingrad Front exploded out of their starting positions in the southern sector. The Romanian 4th Army and German 4th Panzer Army buckled under the Soviet assault, and their battered remnants hurried westward.

All was chaos as the scything Russian spearheads punched through the disintegrating Axis defences. By 23 November, just four days after the beginning of Uranus, the northern and southern Soviet pincers had linked up at Sovetsky, near the crucial rail-crossing over the Don River at Kalach, which had itself been captured by the Soviets the day before. The Uranus trap had clamped shut. Stranded within the Stalingrad 'Kessel' (cauldron), surrounded by enemies, were some 250,000 Axis troops, all of whom would shortly be running low on food, fuel and ammunition unless they could be promptly resupplied.

### FORTRESS STALINGRAD

On 22 November, Paulus communicated by wireless that the 6th Army had been surrounded. In his response, Hitler acknowledged Paulus' predicament but did not give him permission to make a breakout. It would never be forthcoming. Two days later, on the morning of 24 November, Paulus received another message from the



## ZHUKOV'S SCYTHES OF VENGEANCE



Führer. There would be no thought of a breakout from the city on the Volga, which Hitler had declared to be a 'festung' (fortress). The 6th Army was to hold 'Fortress Stalingrad' at all costs. Its fate had been sealed.

Hitler had been promised by master of the Luftwaffe Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring that his airmen could supply the trapped soldiers in the Stalingrad pocket with enough supplies to keep them going. He was horribly wrong. The 6th Army said it needed 700 tons per day to remain operational. Göring told Hitler that his transport planes could deliver 600 a day. But the Luftwaffe did not have nearly enough transport aircraft to accomplish this, and this figure did not take into account bad weather or the predictable Soviet interference.

Yet Hitler had misplaced faith in the Luftwaffe's ability to create an air bridge for the besieged garrison in Stalingrad.

Here, his memory of the survival of the German troops trapped in the Demyansk Pocket earlier in 1942, when German transport planes had sustained the encircled men, worked against the 6th Army. Conditions on the Eastern Front had changed drastically in the intervening months. Enemy fighter planes, flying in enormous numbers for a rebuilt Red Air Force, shot down many German transports as they lumbered toward Stalingrad.

The Luftwaffe never came close to 600 tons of supplies a day, and managed to deliver only half that amount on just one occasion. Over time, the 6th Army's few airfields would be eliminated by the steadily encroaching Red Army.

**"BURSTING OUT OF THE DON RIVER BRIDGEHEAD, VATUTIN'S 5TH TANK ARMY OF SOUTHWEST FRONT SMASHED INTO THE ROMANIAN 3RD ARMY'S LEFT FLANK"**



Another impediment to rescuing the 6th Army emerged elsewhere on the Eastern Front. Uranus was not the only major operation launched by the Soviets that autumn. In the central region of the Eastern Front, before Moscow, a concurrent Soviet operation, Mars, aimed to reduce the Rzhev salient, encircle the German 9th Army and remove the pressure on the USSR's capital.

Mars would turn out to be a costly failure that was subsequently largely ignored by Soviet-era histories of

the war, but it did have at least one beneficial effect for the Red Army. The sheer weight of Soviet arms hurled at the Germans in front of Moscow pinned down large numbers of German troops there who could not be sent south to the relief of the 6th Army in Stalingrad.

Paulus' soldiers would never be saved. The relief attempt mounted by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's Army Group Don

that December, Operation Wintergewitter (Winter Storm), failed to break through the Red Army's cordon around Stalingrad. Paulus himself had never received permission from Hitler to make a breakout attempt of any kind, and even if he had, his men, weakened by starvation and freezing, would likely have been cut down by the Soviets if they had ever tried to flee the Kessel through the deep snow on foot, over dozens of miles, to German lines.

Instead, they would surrender en masse to the triumphant Soviets the next February, to be marched across the snow-covered steppe into ignominious captivity. Most would perish. The tide of the war on the Eastern Front had turned.

**Above left Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, commander of the 6th Army, glumly surrendering to the Red Army**

**Above Marshal Erich von Manstein, commander of Army Group Don, tried and failed to reach the 6th Army trapped in Stalingrad**





## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

# HELPING THE RED ARMY

How did American and British aid help win the war on the Eastern Front?

WRITTEN BY KATHARINE MARSH



It seems absurd, looking back, that the United States would spend so much money helping the Soviet Union. With the frigid tensions of the Cold War and the staunch American opposition to communism, it's strange to think that the two countries were fighting side by side in World War II. It went even further than that, too - when it came to aid, the United States was more than willing to send supplies to Russia.

The truth of the matter is that however much it tried to deny it, Russia needed help. "The Americans gave us so many goods without which we wouldn't have been able to form our reserves and continue the war," Soviet General Georgy Zhukov said after the war. Weapons were in short supply and food was scarce. Even the mother of the Soviet's chief censor died from hunger.

The Lend-Lease policy's beginnings were in May 1940, when Churchill asked the United States for temporary use of some destroyers. It turned out that an American law from 1892 stated that the defence secretary could "lease army property for a maximum of five years if the country does not need it". The United States wasn't at war, so Britain got its ships.

When Hitler invaded the USSR in June 1941, Stalin came knocking. President Roosevelt obliged - the Soviet Union was now an ally, after all. As the Germans headed towards Moscow, American ships carrying tanks, planes, guns, ammunition and food arrived in Soviet harbours. Some planes were flown directly from the United States via Alaska and Siberia; others were sent in parts to the Persian Gulf so they could be assembled and flown into the motherland. Of course, the shipments weren't without



Right A 1943 Soviet caricature of Hitler sending his soldiers to fight in the USSR

Below President Roosevelt and Soviet diplomat Molotov in Washington, DC., in 1942







## HELPING THE RED ARMY

their perils - German U-boats sank about 80 cargo ships en route to the USSR.

This went on until the German surrender in 1945. In total, the Soviet Union received 11,000 planes, over 6,000 tanks and tank destroyers, and 300,000 trucks and other military vehicles. That wasn't all - the US also sent 350 locomotives, almost half a million tons of rails and accessories, axles and wheels, and 1,640 flat cars to supply the armies on the Eastern Front.

Mile upon mile of telephone wire accompanied thousands of telephones that arrived from North America, while American tools and other equipment were shipped to the Soviets so they could manufacture their own guns and ammunition.

It wasn't just the United States that was willing to lend a hand in the Soviet Union's war efforts, though. From 1 October 1941 until the end of the war Britain sent a total of £428 million worth of supplies. This included raw materials, food, machinery, medical supplies and hospital equipment alongside war machines.

Lend-Lease items made up a significant part of the Soviet equipment; one-third of its ammunition, half of its aircraft and half of its tanks came from the US and the Commonwealth. This was alongside 15 million pairs of boots, 55 per cent of all the aluminium the Soviet Union used, and 80 per cent of the copper. The programme was essential in driving back the Germans and keeping

spirits up across the vast territory. But that didn't stop the communist leadership from diminishing its role in the war efforts. "It seems that the Russian government wants to hide the fact that it receives help from outside," William Standley, the US ambassador to the USSR, said in a press conference in 1943.

This was an attitude that continued. As recently as 2015, Nikolai Ryzhkov, the Soviet Union's last head of government, wrote: "It can be confidently stated that [Lend-Lease assistance] did not play a decisive role in the Great Victory." But not all Soviet leaders agreed; both Stalin and Khrushchev openly admitted that without the Allied aid the war would have been lost.

But the real problem was to come at the end of the war. It's in the name - Lend-Lease implies some sort of payment. When the fighting finally drew to a close, the United States asked everyone to pay for what they had received. The bill sent to the Soviets was for \$1.3 billion, and it wasn't well received. The USSR was in bad shape and claimed it could only repay \$170 million.

An agreement couldn't be made, and the two countries were sliding into the hostilities of the Cold War. Both were steadfast on the figures they had calculated. It wasn't until 1972 that an agreement was finally signed, and the USSR had to hand over \$722 million by 2001. A small price to pay for unwavering support and the supplies to help stop a full-scale invasion.

**Two American M4 Sherman tanks were recovered from the Barents Sea in 2017 - they'd been sent to the Soviet Union as part of the Lend-Lease policy**







## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

# OPERATION LITTLE SATURN

Desperate to exploit the success of Uranus, the Soviets began an operation that would prove to be a game of tactical opportunism and devastating losses

**WRITTEN BY ARISA LOOMBA**



The region of southern Russia was central to Hitler's overall strategy to conquer the USSR. He planned to take Stalingrad before cutting off Soviet oil supplies in the Caucasus. To this end, Hitler formed two separate armies,

Group A (to the south) and Group B (to the north), tasked with carrying out this plan. Beginning in the summer of 1942, the Germans advanced rapidly through the Soviet Union, and it seemed as though they would be able to cut the USSR off from its southern territories, as well as supply lines from Persia.

As the Germans quickly advanced, though, supply trains carrying resources, fuel and manpower could not keep up, and they began to run low, leading to the decision to head towards Stalingrad and cut off supply shippings on the Volga River. Following months of battle, the vast majority of Stalingrad had been taken by the Germans, despite huge casualties and a now highly overstretched army. This set the tone for impending disaster. Little did they realise, the harsh Russian winter would lead to more difficulty than imagined.

Following the success of the Soviets' Operation Uranus against Army Group B in November 1942 (which had entrapped between 250,000 and 300,000 Axis troops of the German 6th Army and 4th Panzer Army, in Stalingrad), a plan known as Operation Little Saturn was hatched by Soviet General Malinovsky and his 2nd Guards Army.

When it was clear that the Germans were embarking upon Operation Winter Storm (see boxout on page 81), what started as Operation Saturn was downsized to





## OPERATION LITTLE SATURN



Operation Little Saturn. Operation Little Saturn, launched on 16 December, was an attempt to punch through the Axis armies on the Don River and take Rostov, with the aim of thwarting German efforts to retrieve their troops from encirclement in icy Stalingrad. This Red Army operation on the Eastern Front led to battles in the Northern Caucasus and Donets Basin regions of the Soviet Union between December 1942 and February 1943.

Operation Uranus had not only isolated the 6th Army in Stalingrad, but it had punched a massive hole in the German front in southern Russia, providing much room for the Soviets to manoeuvre. Operation Little Saturn was opportunistic thinking on the part of the Soviets, who knew that exploiting and increasing the success of Operation Uranus would be possible during the harsh Russian winter, in which the Germans would have struggled anyway. Thus, a winter campaign could be the best way to hit the Axis armies while they were weak and advancing into a wholly unfamiliar terrain.

There were two stages to Operation Little Saturn. First, in December 1942, the Soviets attempted to cut off the German Army Group A in the Caucasus, though the German launch of Operation Winter Storm disrupted their plans considerably. The Soviets began a pincer movement to cut off the relieving forces. The 1st and 3rd Guards armies attacked from the north, encircling the Italian 8th Army, while to the south the 28th Army set their sights on the 1st Panzer Army. At the same time, the 24th Tank Corps reached the closest airbase to Stalingrad, Tatskinskaya. This was where the Luftwaffe was coordinating its attempt to supply the troops under siege. Encountering dismal weather, the 24th Tank Corps were

**Above** A group of Romanian or Hungarian soldiers in Russia in 1943

## OPERATION WINTER STORM

The failed German counteroffensive to save the besieged troops outside Stalingrad



Operation Wintergewitter, or Winter Storm, lasting from 12–23 December 1942, was a German attempt led by Field Marshal Eric von Manstein, who was widely considered to have been the German army's tactical genius, and the 4th Panzer Army, to relieve the trapped German army from the south after the Soviets' had unleashed Operation Uranus.

The Soviets had successfully trapped them in Stalingrad just as the

Russian winter was setting in. The Volga froze solid, meaning that the Soviets could supply their forces more easily by transporting resources across the ice. The ill-equipped Germans, unfamiliar with surviving Russian conditions, began to die in their thousands. Not only did they die of frostbite, but without any access to new supplies of food, they also succumbed to malnutrition and disease.

The 6th Army, imprisoned in the city and believing that reinforcements were on their way, had been ordered not to break out of Stalingrad and to hold fast. Even if they had decided to disobey orders, as some had wished to do, they could not have succeeded. They had neither sufficient fuel for a motorised breakout nor the know-how or resources to make it through the winter conditions on foot.

The Luftwaffe had begun to attempt to supply those trapped via an air bridge, delivering them food and equipment. However, it was quickly clear that the Luftwaffe's attempts would not be sufficient: in the first five days they delivered only ten per cent of the army's minimum daily requirements. The most they ever achieved was 50 per cent.

Moreover, Manstein desperately needed more forces to supplement his line of defence in order to restore his front between Group B to the north and Group A to the south. The only solution, in Manstein's eyes, was to coordinate and facilitate the launch of an immediate breakout of troops from Stalingrad. He began a relief effort: Panzer Corps would strike northeast across the steppe towards Stalingrad, and others would strike from the Don River. However, this plan was unsuccessful due to the stresses exerted by Little Saturn.

Manstein's last remaining option was a breakout with two phases. Phase one, Winter Storm, would see the 6th Army break out and link up with the Panzer Corps, maintaining the Stalingrad front. Phase two would be Thunderclap, a phased withdrawal from Stalingrad. Manstein knew that Hitler would not agree to Thunderclap unless it was made absolutely necessary by the success of Winter Storm.

Initiating Winter Storm could have been possible within four days, and yet Hitler still failed to agree to troops breaking out of Stalingrad, and Manstein could not disobey his orders. Besides, there had not been enough fuel anyway.

Ultimately, Operation Little Saturn, combined with a failure to act, caused the rescue attempt of Operation Winter Storm to crumble and remain unfulfilled. The 6th Army was left to its fate. Of 250,000 Germans held under siege, only 90,000 survived, and these were taken prisoner. In the end, only 5,000 of those originally encircled survived to return to Germany.





## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

in luck, roaming the airfield at leisure, destroying German planes one by one.

The Soviets could have trapped huge numbers of Axis forces in the Caucasus, but under Operation Winter Storm the Axis had set up a mobile defence. Small, makeshift units were told to hold towns until support could arrive. Without orders or direction, officers in the region took initiative to support this rescue mission, rounding up men into makeshift fighting units that could keep hold of this tactical ground in southern Russia. A natural defensive line began to take shape to enact Manstein's plan in terrifying conditions. Food was so scarce that the Wehrmacht's horses were slaughtered for their meat, and supplies were slow as ever in arriving. The armies advanced, but it was questionable as to whether they would reach Stalingrad.

They managed to resist fairly well; the Italians were even outnumbered nine to one at times but managed to hold out for two weeks until 19 December, when they were ordered to withdraw, exposing the entire left wing to potential encirclement. In fact, the Soviets never even got close to Rostov. However, the Axis suffered such significant losses (just 45,000 of 130,000 Italians met by the Soviets in the first stage survived) that hope of the Germans reinforcing or rescuing the 6th Army, who were trapped inside and around Stalingrad, were diminished. There was no choice but to leave them to their fates and for Manstein to retreat, for he could neither revive his armies nor rely on the airlift to deliver supplies to the besieged 6th Army. Manstein was running out of options as Operation Little Saturn was destroying hopes of achieving the aims of Winter Storm.

**Right Wounded German soldiers are transported from the front line**

**Below A column of Soviet tanks during Operation Little Saturn, December 1942**

The second stage of Operation Little Saturn began on 23 January 1943 with four armies of General Golikov's Voronezh Front encircling and quickly destroying the Hungarian 2nd Army near Svoboda on the Don River. As a result of the attack, the Hungarian 2nd Army no longer represented a meaningful fighting force and ceased to offer any real resistance. As well as the Hungarians, the second stage also saw the Italian Alpini Corps encircled within three days, much like the German 6th Army in Stalingrad, forcing them to retreat. By February, some of the Alpini reached Kharkov and helped to form a weak line of defence that was decimated almost immediately. By 5 February, after almost wiping out the German 2nd Army, the armies of the Voronezh Front approached Kursk and Kharkov.

Operation Little Saturn was therefore seen as a success in many ways for the Soviets: they succeeded in crushing Germany's Italian and Hungarian allies and pushed the Germans to their limits. Nevertheless, Operation Little Saturn was taxing for both sides. The

**"FOOD WAS SO SCARCE THAT THE WEHRMACHT'S HORSES WERE SLAUGHTERED FOR THEIR MEAT, AND SUPPLIES WERE SLOW AS EVER IN ARRIVING"**

Soviets also became severely depleted and overstretched as a result, setting themselves up for a challenge during the German offensives of the Third Battle of Kharkov.

Operation Little Saturn, as part of both the larger Battle of Stalingrad and the Soviet-German War of 1941-1945, is often an overlooked part of World War II, despite being a key episode in the struggle between the two powers. This epic contest was fought in extreme climates and inhospitable, almost uninhabitable terrains. It is hard to get a complete picture of the significance of these battles on the Eastern Front to the larger global war, given that Western historians naturally prioritise those that took place in Central and Western Europe.

Moreover, we have mainly German accounts to gain our understandings from, rather than a totally balanced perspective. The Cold War further increased distrust of Soviet sources in future years, and few Western historians spoke enough Russian to really grasp what there was to learn. And yet, the weakening of both the Axis and Soviet forces during this period had huge global consequences for the outcome of World War II. Operation Barbarossa is often one of the only phases on the Eastern Front that has remained in the public consciousness. But we ought not to forget Operation Little Saturn, a brutal winter period that drastically weakened the Axis.





## OPERATION LITTLE SATURN







## THE BEGINNING OF THE END







## THE THIRD BATTLE OF KHARKOV



# THE THIRD BATTLE OF KHARKOV

In the wake of the disaster at Stalingrad, Erich von Manstein was tasked with restoring order at the southern end of the Eastern Front. He devised a masterplan to halt the seemingly unstoppable Soviet advance

**WRITTEN BY TIM WILLIAMSON**

Waffen-SS troops  
photographed in  
Kharkov, March 1943



uring the winter of 1942, Hitler's second offensive against the Soviet Union was coming to a miserable end, the faint hopes of victory shattered in the frozen rubble of Stalingrad.

By December, Georgy Zhukov's successful Operation Uranus had successfully cut off and surrounded around 300,000 Axis troops in the city - they were now separated by over 100 miles and thousands of Red Army troops.

On 12 December, Erich von Manstein, commander of the newly created Army Group Don, launched an attempted rescue of the beleaguered 6th Army, making a thrust towards the city in order to link up with General Friedrich Paulus' men. Backed by only meagre, half-strength formations, including Luftwaffe personnel pressed into infantry roles, Operation Winter Storm was a desperate roll of the dice, made even more risky once the Soviets followed up their success with Operation Little Saturn on 16 December.

Little Saturn aimed to destroy the Italian 8th Army along the Don River and to capture the critical port of Rostov, which would split the Axis line in the south. Though the Italians resisted bravely, and Rostov was not captured, on 23 December Manstein was forced to call a halt to Winter Storm, and the 6th Army was left to its fate.

Though the Stalingrad pocket would tie up several Soviet armies for a number of weeks to come, the loss of the 6th Army severely weakened the front between Army Group A in the Caucasus Mountains further to the south and Manstein's Army Group Don, which had been hastily reorganised to plug the gap. Worse still, the Red Army followed up Little Saturn with yet more offensives, striking west into the Donbass and southwest from Voronezh in order to drive the Axis further back into Ukraine. Again, the ultimate goal for Stalin would be to cut off and destroy Army Group A, which through January began withdrawing from the Caucasus region northwest into the Donets Basin and west towards the Kuban peninsula, between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea.

Launched by Nikolai Vatutin on 29 January, Operation Gallop saw four Soviet armies - including the 6th Army and 1st Guards Army - and Mobile Group Popov attack west and southwest into the Donbass region, with the aim of simultaneously liberating Rostov and securing the Dnieper River. In support, Filipp Golikov's Operation Star was launched on 2 February on the Voronezh Front further north. This attack consisted of five armies, including the 3rd Tank Army commanded by Pavel Rybalko. The objectives of the operation included Belgorod, Kursk and Kharkov, the fourth-largest city in the Soviet Union and already the scene of several previous bloody battles. According to one German general, the Soviet offensives in the wake of Stalingrad were conducted over a front 750 miles long and advanced up to 435 miles into Axis-held territory.





## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Lacking full-strength divisions to repel the Soviet attacks, Manstein desperately appealed to Berlin for support, or for permission to reorganise his defensive line, which was constantly buckling under pressure. At the end of January some reinforcements did begin to arrive, with the mostly fresh SS Panzer Corps entering west of Kharkov. Lieutenant General Paul Hausser commanded three SS Panzer divisions: Das Reich, Totenkopf and Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, which consisted of 50,000 troops and over 300 tanks, including nearly 30 Tiger tanks. These reinforcements would be essential to Manstein's planned masterstroke.

On 2 February, the last remnants of German resistance in Stalingrad capitulated, which freed up the besieging Soviet armies to join the attack on Manstein's line. On 6 February Manstein was summoned to Hitler's Wolf's Lair HQ in East Prussia to discuss the dire situation. After much persuading, the Führer agreed to Manstein's demands to withdraw Army Detachment Hollidt currently in the Don and Donets Basin to reposition further west along the River Mius, along with the 4th and 1st Panzer Armies - the former repositioned entirely to the left wing of Manstein's line around the city of Dnepropetrovsk. Manstein had also petitioned Hitler for a change to the chain of command, in effect asking for him to relinquish control as commander-in-chief, though this request was met with even less enthusiasm.

This strategic withdrawal has been dubbed by some historians as a castling move - a reference to the chess move whereby the rook and king swap positions. On the battlefield, the albeit daring redeployment of the 4th Panzer Army would allow Manstein the necessary reserves to launch his planned counter-attack. He knew that the relentless Soviet advances throughout the winter would take their toll on the Red Army as they became overextended by their own success. Biding his time, Manstein waited for the perfect moment to launch his own offensive.

Meanwhile, on the Soviets' Voronezh Front, Kursk and Belgorod were captured by 11 February and Golikov pushed on towards Kharkov. The city was defended by the SS Panzer Corps, and Hausser had orders from Hitler to defend the city at all costs and to the last man. However, after much confusion, Hausser tactically withdrew on the night of 15-16 February in order to avoid becoming trapped in the city. Soviet forces successfully occupied Kharkov the following day, with only pockets of German resistance.

Furious at the symbolic loss of Kharkov, Hitler flew to the frontline for another meeting with Manstein. He and his entourage arrived at the town of Zaporozhye to assess the situation closer at hand, where he came within only a few miles of advancing Red Army tanks. This was a stark indicator to the Führer of the fluid and perilous situation at hand.

By mid-February Golikov and Vatutin's forces were tiring and their supply lines were stretched thin. For

Manstein, though Kharkov had fallen, there had been no disastrous encirclement, and the German defensive line remained intact. He was now ready to launch his 'backhand strike' to attack and cut off the extended Soviet 1st Guards, 3rd Tank and 6th Armies, as well as Mobile Group Popov, which consisted of four tank corps. At the time, these forces numbered some 165,000 men and 250 tanks. Entrapping and destroying these armies would entirely crush the Soviet momentum and stabilise the collapsing Army Group South (Manstein's Army Group Don was redesignated on 13 February).

From its new position in Krasnograd, the SS Panzer Corps struck southeast towards Pavlograd on 20 February, attacking the Soviet 25th Tank Corps in the area over the following two days. In the south, 48th Panzer Corps began its attack north on 23 February to join up with SS Panzer Corps at Pavlograd. Meanwhile, the under-strength Army Detachment Hollidt held the Soviets at bay along the Mius, preventing a breakthrough across the coast of the Sea of Azov.

40th Panzer Corps, from 1st Panzer Army, attacked north also on the 20 February, catching Mobile Group Popov off guard at Krasnoarmeysk and pushing further north, forcing Popov's crippled formations to retreat. By 24 February, Manstein's three principle attacking groups had advanced up to 37 miles into Soviet territory.

Despite the rampaging German armour causing chaos within their lines, the Soviet 6th Army managed to create a new defensive position at Lozovaya, northeast of Pavlograd. The SS Panzer Corps began a fresh attack here on the night of 24 February, with the Das Reich division pinning the Soviet defenders down while the Totenkopf division moved to encircle and cut off any retreat. Though the Soviets put up a heroic fight, even taking out several German tanks, the city fell to the Germans on 28 February.

Manstein's 'backhand' had now reached south of Kharkov and was preparing to land an upper-cut against the city. Pavel Rybalko's 3rd Tank Army was ordered to



Above Manstein and Richthofen, pictured on an airstrip near the front line, meet with Adolf Hitler, February 1943





## THE THIRD BATTLE OF KHARKOV



move south of the city to intercept those elements of the SS Panzer Corps that had arrived and threatened to advance north. However, Rybalko had only around 60 operational tanks with which to counter the Germans, all of which were lost in this desperate attack, along with around 9,000 casualties. With permission from Stalin, Rybalko began falling back to the Donets River, mounting a fighting retreat through Kharkov with the SS Panzer Corps in pursuit.

By 28 February, the 4th Panzer Army reported 156 enemy tanks destroyed or captured during their advance, with up to 15,000 casualties inflicted. The offensive had effectively split the Red Army at the joint between Golikov's Voronezh and Vatutin's Southwest fronts, exploiting the Red Army's extended lines but also gaps that emerged between the two fronts.

When originally delivering his orders Manstein had made clear the objective "was not the possession of Kharkov, but the... destruction of the enemy units located there". He feared a second Stalingrad, knowing the bitter toll street-to-street fighting would take. Nonetheless, the SS Panzer Corps followed up its defeat of the 3rd Tank Army

with a push north towards Kharkov, eager to retake the city they had just a month earlier been forced to abandon. The battle for Kharkov began on the night of 11-12 March and lasted for three days, with dogged Soviet defenders holding out to the last in the city's large tractor factory. Following this victory, Hausser pressed the advantage further north, taking the city of Belgorod on 18 March.

The Soviet steamroller, aiming to push the Germans back beyond the Dnieper River, had come to a grinding halt, and the Axis frontline had, at least temporarily, been saved from collapse. The Soviets had suffered huge losses, with the Germans estimating 23,000 dead and 615 tanks captured or destroyed between the Donets and Dnieper rivers. Meanwhile, the decimation of the 3rd Tank Army south of Kharkov was a particular blow to the Red Army. With the weather beginning to thaw, creating a slushy, boggy landscape, both sides hunkered down and regrouped. Manstein's counter-offensive was complete. Later dubbed a 'miracle' by some, strategically the victory had only granted a brief reprieve for the German position on the Eastern Front. The decisive blow would be struck later that year, around the Kursk salient.

### THE LUFTWAFFE'S EASTERN FRONT FINALE

Now a shadow of its former might, Germany's air force would play an important role in the critical operations on the Eastern Front

In late 1942, Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen's Luftflotte 4 became the 6th Army's lifeline, providing supplies and air support to the troops trapped in Stalingrad as well as offering close air support to the region. To achieve this, the Luftflotte was organised into divisions, each connected to a region – Air Division Donets, for instance, provided support for Army Detachment Hollidt defending Rostov and along the Donets, while the VIII Air Corps was committed to the resupply flights over Stalingrad.

German tank-hunters flew daily sorties, targeting Soviet breakthroughs and supporting Axis infantry or vehicles in danger of becoming overrun. Once the 6th Army was abandoned, Richthofen's focus turned to covering the fighting withdrawal from the Don and Donetsk region and the Caucasus in the south.

In February 1943, Luftflotte 4 aircraft were tracking and hampering the progress of Operations Star and Gallop, using specially created ground-attack and twin-engine formations to target tank columns that had breached the German lines. Radio intelligence also intercepted messages from Mobile Group Popov, revealing not only the group's movements and location but also its dire lack of fuel.

During the climactic drive of the SS Panzer Corps towards Kharkov in the first week of March, new groups of aircraft were assigned to specifically support the assault. I and IV Air Corps organised sorties to continually harass the already crippled Soviet columns retreating through the city. When Hausser's SS Panzer Corps finally took Belgorod in March, Richthofen's aircraft once again were on hand to prevent a fierce Soviet counter-attack. Though the Luftwaffe men had proven more than their worth in Manstein's plans, it would be the last time they would participate in such a successful offensive operation.







# DOWNFALL

## 90 TIGER VS T-34

The largest tank battle in history pitted two of the war's greatest machines against each other

## 118 ENDGAME: THE FALL OF THE THIRD REICH

While Hitler ranted and raved inside his bunker, the nation he had led to war convulsed in its final death throes, a relentless Red Army closing in on all sides. The reign of the Third Reich was over

## 102 THE PUSH TO BERLIN

As a shattered, blood-soaked motherland reeled behind them, the men and women of the Red Army turned their gaze West, knowing that vengeance would one day be wrought upon the lands of the enemy

## 108 WARSAW RISES

Lacking sufficient weaponry and numbers didn't stop the courageous fighters of Poland's capital from confronting their merciless oppressors







## DOWNFALL

# TIGER VS T-34

During the Battle of Kursk in July 1943, two of the finest tanks ever created faced one another in a mighty contest that would change the course of the war

WRITTEN BY NIK CORNISH

**G**ermany's Operation Citadel aimed to cut off the salient around Kursk, but standing before their formidable armoured divisions stood a Soviet defence bristling with its own powerful tanks. The two had met briefly earlier in the year during the fighting around Rostov-on-Don and Kharkov, but Kursk was the first occasion in which they fought in significant numbers.

In July 1943 Army Group Centre (AGC) faced Central Front, and Army Group South (AGS) prepared to do battle with Voronezh Front and then Steppe Front for the Kursk salient. Tigers were organised into heavy Panzer battalions comprising three or four companies. Four Tigers formed a zug (platoon) and three or four zugs formed a kompanie (company). Tanks in a zug often moved and worked in pairs.

By the summer of 1943 the various models of T-34/76 were very familiar to the Wehrmacht. The German evaluation of the T-34 during the winter of 1941-42 in effect advised, 'copy it'. The result was the Panther.

Two Tigers work as a pair during the campaign in the Soviet Union. The side guards, above the tracks, appear to have been removed, probably to avoid the wheels clogging with mud or slush

The Tiger was less known and understood by the Red Army, but an intact Tiger had been captured near Leningrad in January 1943 and thoroughly analysed at the testing ground at Kubinka. Among the conclusions reached was that the T-34 would have to be up-gunned from the 76mm weapon that was its main armament. The result, the T-34/85, was not available in time for Kursk, so the Red Army would be reliant on the T-34/76.

### THE SOVIET ARMoured FIST

When the Germans first encountered the T-34 they were horrified, as they had virtually no anti-tank gun capable of destroying it. However, primitive tactics, poor training and maintenance and a lack of logistical support, particularly fuel, cost the Red Army its precious advantage. But not for long.

Gradually, experience improved all these shortcomings. When the T-34 with an 85mm gun was introduced later in 1943 they once again regained superiority, as it addressed many of the main problems that earlier experience had highlighted.





## TIGER VS T-34



The T-34 was developed when the need for a medium tank became apparent in the late 1930s. One of the major specifications was ease of mass production. From the various prototypes the A-32 was chosen, which became known as the T-34. Production began in the spring of 1940 and, when the 76 version was phased out in 1944, roughly 35,500 had been built. Stalin had, in late 1941, vetoed any major alterations to the T-34 in order to simplify and increase production. Nevertheless, modifications were carried out as evacuated factories slowly came back into production during 1942-43, and supplies of items such as radios and optics were soon improved. Consequently, at Kursk the T-34 was a tried and thoroughly tested machine with a wealth of spares that were easy to replace.

Conversely, if one of the Tiger's internal overlapped wheels was damaged, the mechanics had to remove up to eight wheels and undo 45 bolts. Naturally, this was carried out after raising the tank and loosening the track. Of course, all these actions were then performed in reverse. This operation on a T-34 was far easier.

T-34s were organised into platoons of three, with three platoons making a company and three or four companies a battalion. A tank brigade, comprising two or three battalions, was usually the smallest formation that carried out independent missions. Crewed by four men (and sometimes women), the task allocation was driver/mechanic, machine gunner/radio operator (when fitted), loader and commander. With the radio located to the right of the hull machine gun and with the commander in the turret, external communications depended on the radio operator relaying information and orders via the poor-quality intercom to the commander. However, the tank commander was also the gunner, and this vital task obviously detracted from his ability to command.

Considerable responsibility was placed on the driver to keep up with the unit, avoid problematic terrain and generally be aware of the often-chaotic situation around them. The loader simply loaded, which in itself was a physically exhausting task, as the bulk of the tank's 100 rounds of ammunition (each one weighing approximately nine kilograms, or 20 pounds) was stored

## T-34 TECH SPECS

### ARMAMENT

From February 1941 the main gun was the F-34 76.2mm, capable of firing armour-piercing, HE and shrapnel rounds. There were two 7.62mm machine guns, one hull-mounted and one mounted co-axially with the main weapon. In earlier models 77 shells were carried, nine of which were stored in the turret itself and the remainder in containers that formed the deck beneath the turret. Of these 21 were AP. When the hexagonal turret was introduced the number of shells increased to 100, with 14 placed inside the turret. The kill range when confronted by a Tiger's thick frontal armour was under 500 metres.

### ENGINE

All models mounted the V2 diesel engine with a top speed of 29 miles per hour on the road, and 22 miles per hour off-road.

### FUEL CAPACITY

Internally, 610 litres were in eight fuel tanks built into the hull of the vehicle. From the 1943 model onwards up to three external fuel cylinders were attached to the outside of the hull to the rear, which carried a further 270 litres. Prior to that, two external fuel boxes were attached to the hull at the rear of the engine compartment. Range on the road was 236 miles, and off-road 161 miles.

### ARMOUR

**Front plate:** 45mm sloped at 60°  
**Turret:** 45mm sloped at 30°  
**Gun mounting:** 85mm  
**Sides:** 40mm sloped at 40°  
**Rear plate:** 40mm sloped at 48°  
**Floor:** 16mm under the crew, 14mm under the engine





## DOWNFALL



**Tigers on a runway in 1944. The Zimmerit paste, used to prevent magnetic mines from attaching, can clearly be seen on the tanks**

in the floor of the tank. As one T-34 commander, having ordered up a round, recalled, he looked around only to discover "the loader laying, lights out, on the ammo boxes [below him]. He'd been poisoned by the fumes and lost consciousness."

Being overcome by the fumes from when the gun fired was a problem caused by the poor positioning of the fan that was supposed to ventilate the vehicle. Equally problematic for the loader was the lack of room in the turret, as the gun's breech was long, and if the turret were rotated it could easily knock him out or cause other injuries.

The commander's gunnery tasks were also difficult. First he would find his target through the periscope, then use the separate gun sight to aim - two actions that used valuable time.

If the loader was quick, the round went in and the gun was fired. Unfortunately, during training tankers did not get much firing practice at anything other than stationary targets, and consequently gunnery was not an exact science for the crews. Indeed, at the Battle of Prokhorovka (part of the larger Battle of Kursk) the orders issued to the tankers were simple: drive at

the enemy fast in order to reduce the range, fire upon approach, and use the terrain to mask the approach.

Weighing 28 tons when carrying fuel and ammunition, the T-34 was certainly fast and manoeuvrable. However, it also suffered from abysmal optics and a lack of viewing ports, leading the Germans to describe its crew as 'blind', which, when combined with the commander's combined role as gunner, contributed to a dangerously low awareness of the combat environment.







## TIGER VS T-34

'Spartan' would be the most complimentary way to describe the T-34's interior from a crewman's point of view. The position of the driver's and machine gunner's seats was awkward and uncomfortable, making the driver's job in particular physically exhausting. When Fifth Guards Tank Army (GTA) drove 248 miles to reinforce the Voronezh Front, drivers had to be lifted out of their positions by their comrades and massaged back to something near physical normality.

These men and women had driven their tanks at night over the course of three days to retain the element of surprise, as well as helping to avoid Luftwaffe attacks. Mentally the effort must have been shattering. No records are available for the number of vehicles that broke down en route, but clearly the vast majority reached their objective. Given the poor reliability of the Tiger's engines, it seems rather unlikely that as many of the German tanks would have made it.

**T-34s were often used to help move soldiers forward rapidly over rough or exposed terrain**







## DOWNFALL

Men and machines lie  
wrecked on the scarred  
battleground of Kursk





## TIGER VS T-34







## DOWNFALL

# TITANS OF WAR



he Tiger was conceived as a heavy tank of the type known as 'breakthrough tanks'. However, development was slow and, having gone through a series of prototypes, two competitors for the contract were identified – one produced by Porsche, the other by Henschel. The Henschel Tiger went into production in August 1942 and production ended two years later, after 1,350 had been built.

One major derivative, the Tiger II, was developed from the original, and the others were largely irrelevant. The Tiger certainly fulfilled the 'heavy' part of the brief, weighing in at some 56 tons fully loaded. This meant that to cross water obstacles it would require a 60-ton-capacity bridge, which were few and far between. Despite the first 495 Tigers having a built-in snorkel, climbing out of the water onto a progressively more saturated bank negated this accessory.

The simple question of how to move a damaged machine of this weight seems to have been completely

**A Tiger, accompanied by infantry, advances in January 1944. Its wide tracks made it better suited to operate in snow and mud**

overlooked. It required at least two heavy-duty prime movers to haul one Tiger out of a ditch or simply into a position where the repair crews could get to work. Furthermore, German eagerness to get the Tiger into action had prevented the accumulation, not to mention the distribution, of spare parts.

Consequently, when the dense Soviet minefields began to take their toll, basic items such as track pins were unavailable to the maintenance companies. This resulted in the cannibalisation of other damaged Tigers to keep at least some in action. This problem was brought into sharp relief when on the first day of Operation Citadel, 5 July, 13 out of 14 tanks of the Tiger company attached to 19th Panzer Division were put out of action due to mines. Indeed, such were the repair







## TIGER VS T-34

problems faced by AGN's Tiger Battalion that by 6 July, just the second day of fighting, half of its Tigers were out of commission and a request was sent to the factory in central Germany for ten transmissions and engines, as well as more basic parts. These were eventually flown in and, on 9 July, the battalion withdrew for repairs.

However, the Tiger was well provided with radio and intercom equipment both for external and internal communications, as well as excellent optics and a good number of vision ports, so an alert commander would have a better awareness of events around him than his Red Army counterpart. Responsibilities for the five-man crew were broken down as commander, gunner, loader, driver and radio operator/hull machine-gunner. This was clearly a more sensible arrangement than in the T-34.

Internally the Tiger was considerably more spacious. It was also painted, which spared the crew the danger of injury from flying metal shards when a shell hit the machine, unlike the T-34, the inside of which was bare metal. In the event of a driver being disabled or killed the machine-gunner was expected to haul the casualty out of the way and take over - a difficult task given the lack of space. In a Tiger there was more room for this grim but vital task.

As a result of the experience gained at Kursk - where tank-hunting infantry teams worked to attach magnetic mines to the hull of a tank if it was travelling slowly or bogged down - Zimmerit paste was applied to the Tiger (and other tanks) from August 1943 onwards in order to prevent magnetic mines from attaching.







## DOWNFALL

# KILLS & LOSSES

**T**he debate and research concerning this topic continues to exercise the minds of historians. No single source can really claim to be definitive as both sides had their own reasons for overstating their 'kill' count. The Soviets inflated their numbers, particularly of Tigers, to justify their own severe losses. The Germans did so for the simple reason that they lost. Equally problematic is the definition of a 'kill': does it mean a track blown off, the turret blown off, or the vehicle sinking into the mud up to the track tops and being abandoned? Furthermore, some Russian researchers in the post-Soviet world have reflected their anti-communist stance to inflate Red Army losses. Here is not the place to enter this discussion.

There was something in the region of 95 Tigers operable with AGS on 4 July, and by 15 July, when AGS halted and the last blow of Operation Citadel had been struck, there were 63 available. However, the Soviets did not consider the fighting in the Kursk Bulge (as the Russians call it) on the southern face over until 23 July and so continued to count kills.

AGC's Tiger losses, from the 31 tanks committed on 5 July, are awkward to assess as the records of Ninth Army are difficult to access. However, on 10 July there were 26 still operational. By 12 July AGC had shot its bolt and the Soviets had unleashed Operation Kutuzov, which aimed to destroy AGC. Judging by those figures, 37 Tigers were irretrievably lost by both AGS and AGC.

Keeping score for the T-34 was less problematic as it was a familiar and easily identified vehicle. The three fronts involved, including armour from Steppe Front, committed 2,730, of which 854 were lost by Voronezh and Steppe Fronts but only 175 by Central Front. This simply reflects the different commitment levels of armour on the northern and southern faces of the salient.

It must also be remembered that at the end of operations the Red Army was in a position to pick over the remains of its tanks and restore what was worth saving, whereas the Germans were not. Soviet tank crews were paid a bonus of 1,000 roubles for every confirmed kill. Interestingly, Stalin, not generally fussed over casualties, almost put General Rotmistrov, commander of the 5th Guards Tank Army, on trial for his command's catastrophic losses during the Battle of Prokhorovka.



Pavel Rotmistrov's 5th Guards Tank Army suffered such high losses that Stalin considered arresting him

## ON THE BATTLEFIELD

### ARMY GROUP NORTH

Most accounts of Operation Citadel focus on the movements of AGS due to the Battle of Prokhorovka. Consequently, the rather less well-known activities of AGN are often overlooked, as is the deployment of the 31 Tigers of Heavy Panzer Battalion 505. However, 505 was only joined by its third company on 8 July, hence its lower numbers.

### ARMY GROUP SOUTH

Each of the three SS Panzer Grenadier divisions of II SS Panzer Corps – Liebstandarte, Das Reich and Totenkopf – had an integral Tiger company. Additionally, the Grossdeutschland Panzer Grenadier Division had its own 15-machine Tiger company. Heavy Panzer Battalion 503 was a part of III Panzer Corps under Army Detachment Kempf: it was split up, with one company each going to 6th, 11th and 19th Panzer divisions respectively.

### THE T-34

The deployment of the T-34 was universal. Other than some specialist heavy tank formations, almost every Soviet armoured formation included them.

The major units were the three tank armies that were engaged in the defensive phase of the Kursk fighting. 1st Tank Army was part of Voronezh Front, 2nd Tank Army subordinated to Central Front, and the 5th Guards Tank Army (GTA) was held in reserve as part of Steppe Front. In addition, separate tank formations were allocated to the various armies of both Central and Voronezh fronts. The bulk of these units were formed of T-34s. Voronezh Front counted 946, of which 1st Tank Army held 477, V Guards Tank Corps 127 and 7th Guards Army 114. These were supported by a further 584 in the 5th GTA, II and X Tank Corps.

Central Front deployed roughly 1,200 T-34s, split between Second Tank Army, IX and XIX Tank corps.





## TIGER VS T-34







## DOWNFALL



A burned-out T-34, watched by two SS men, July 1943. Soviet tankers were only allowed to abandon their vehicle if it were on fire or the main gun was inoperable. The punishment for those who did so at any other moment was severe. This vehicle has clearly burned out; the rubber tyres are melted and the turret hatch appears to be closed, suggesting the crew died inside.



'Desant' infantry are mounted on the tanks. Lacking armoured personnel carriers and trucks with speedy cross-country performance, the Red Army used tanks to carry infantry into the attack. When their objective was reached the infantry would leap boldly off and into action. What a trip was like at 18 miles per hour over rough terrain and under fire is not difficult to imagine.



The Tiger that never was. Henschel won the contract for the Tiger, and the rejected prototype, made by Porsche, was only available in chassis form. Rather than waste these assets it was decided to use them as heavy jagdpanzers (tank hunters) by the addition of an 88mm Pak 43 gun in a heavily armoured superstructure. Roughly 90 were deployed with Ninth Army, where their performance was mixed. The vehicle shown here is being inspected by senior Russian officers.







## TIGER VS T-34



In late 1941 and early 1942 add-on hull armour plates were welded to T-34s as a response to improving German anti-tank guns. The plates were between 20-35mm thick and were non-uniform in shape. They were dropped in February 1942, possibly due to a shortage of spare armour plate.



The camouflage colours of Yellow, brown and green were introduced on 18 February 1943. Prior to that date dark grey was the standard factory finish. Skirt armour to protect the tracks was not added to the Tiger to avoid it clogging with mud and to keep the weight down. The Tiger was the first German tank with wide tracks, which improved its ability to cope with mud and snow.

### TOP TANK?

The T-34 was a medium tank, the Tiger a heavy tank, therefore direct comparisons are absurd. The Tiger was well engineered in a long-established factory, while the T-34 was mass produced in often relocated, under-manned factories where numbers mattered more than quality or refinement. However, the T-34 series did lead to the up-gunned 85 version and the chassis was successfully used for the SU 85 and SU 100 tank destroyer versions, which were rather more flexible than the Tiger II (King Tiger) or the Jagdtiger.

Furthermore, 20 T-34s served at Kursk with SS Panzer Grenadier Division Das Reich, which is testament to the esteem in which they were held. Two T-34s were used by 6th Panzer Division to deceive the defenders of a vital bridge south of Prokhorovka into not firing – the deception succeeded, allowing the Tigers to cross.

To counter this threat a substantial force was moved off from the main fighting to contain this bridgehead. According to Soviet records, some Tigers were taken into service with the Red Army during late 1943-44 but proved too difficult to maintain and were abandoned when they wore out.

In the final analysis, the Red Army was victorious at Kursk and the T-34 was the tank that made it possible. As someone (Stalin by most accounts) said, "Quantity has a quality of its own." General Heinz Guderian, who witnessed a T-34 attack at Kursk on 10 July, compared it to, "rats streaming across the landscape". Bad luck for the cat.



Images: Alamy, Nik Cornish, Getty

Into action, the Tigers of 505 Heavy Panzer Battalion move out with their accompanying Panzer IIIs. The attack formation would have the Tigers heading a Panzerkeil (armoured wedge) to act as the breakthrough element of an attack that would be exploited by Panzer IIIs and IVs. This ideal formation was rarely employed during Operation Citadel. Other heavy Panzer battalions had begun to lose their Panzer IIIs, and the Tiger units were to be used without ancillary tanks





## DOWNFALL

# THE PUSH TO BERLIN

As the tide of the war began to turn, the Red Army launched a vast offensive and forced its way towards the German capital

**WRITTEN BY CALLUM MCKELVIE**



German troops during the final evacuation of Sevastopol





## THE PUSH TO BERLIN



Following victory at Kursk, Stalin instructed his army to begin a vast offensive, the ultimate goal of which was to force the Wehrmacht back into German territory. In roughly two years Soviet troops would almost completely

retake the Eastern Front, and Hitler's staunch refusal to listen to his commanding officers and retreat would result in vast swathes of his forces being obliterated.

The offensive began on 7 August 1943, with an operation key to pushing the German military out of the USSR, as the Red Army moved to retake the city of Smolensk. This massive advance was known as Operation Suvorov and would necessitate the liberating of numerous cities, including Dorogobuzh and Dukhovshchina, before reaching Smolensk itself. Firstly, however, Soviet troops would need to take Yelnya. Knowing this, the Wehrmacht began to prepare a vicious defence of the city, fortifying the perimeter, placing heavy artillery in the hills and mining the marshy areas surrounding the Desna and Ugra rivers. However, the Soviet forces were ready for such an event and the assault began with a heavy shelling and aerial bombardment, designed to severely weaken the German troops - it was a tactic they would use numerous times during the following battles. By 30 August Yelnya had been successfully liberated and the Red Army was able to continue its move forward, capturing Dorogobuzh the next day.

In September of 1943, the Red Army had regained enough territory that they were able to begin the final stage of the Smolensk operation, moving to liberate the city itself along with Vitebsk and Orsha. This began on 14 September, as with other attacks, with a preliminary artillery bombardment. Soviet forces on the Kalinin Front created a salient some 19 miles wide, and after four days of fighting they were able to capture Dukhovshchina. The Western Front was then able to similarly create a salient 12 miles wide, taking a key railway hub, Yartsevo, only a day later, and by 19 September this had extended to a 150-mile-wide gap in the Wehrmacht's lines. On 25 September, the battle to take Smolensk reached the streets of the city itself. For most of the night bloody urban warfare was waged as the Red Army captured block after block. By the early hours of the following morning the Axis troops were forced to flee and Smolensk was free of the Nazi terror.

The Smolensk operation was an important initial victory in the Soviet retaking of the Eastern Front. But the assault was also crucial in assisting another offensive that had begun on 26 August and was occurring further south. The Battle of the Dnieper was one of the largest operations during World War II and is said to have involved some 4,000,000 troops on both sides. Its intention, initially, was to retrieve the eastern bank of the Dnieper River and push the Wehrmacht back across it. On 23 August 1943, Soviet forces had been able to recapture





## DOWNFALL



**Right** The ruins of Smolensk following the Nazi occupation and subsequent battle

**Below** Soviet troops remove a Swastika at the Kerch Metallurgical Plant in the Crimea following victory



the city of Kharkov. By the 31st they had achieved their goal, creating a 62-mile break in German lines and giving the Wehrmacht no choice but to retreat across the Dnieper River. The Soviet capture of Smolensk proved instrumental in preventing a large number of German troops from returning to assist their comrades. Some 30 to 40 divisions were left separated and unable to provide reinforcements or transport vital supplies.

At the end of September, Soviet forces had successfully taken 20 bridgeheads along the river, and during October they began stockpiling reserves and preparing crossing points. Following this, from 3 November to 22 December, the Red Army would commence a battle that would be one of the most brutal during the entire liberation of the Eastern Front.

The city of Kiev had suffered the horrors of a Nazi occupation for some three years, and as the German forces prepared to retreat towards the Dnieper line, one





## THE PUSH TO BERLIN



**"SOME 57,000 GERMAN AND ROMANIAN SOLDIERS, THE MAJORITY OF WHICH DROWNED, WERE LOST DURING THE ENTIRE OPERATION"**

of the tasks given to the Red Army was to liberate the city and obliterate the 4th Panzer Army. As the German troops quickly retreated, Major General Heinrich Roth was instructed to take his 88th Infantry Division and retreat to the city. He was also told to hold it - no matter the cost. On 5 November, following the collapse of the German front, the Red Army entered the city and brutal street fighting began. Block by block, Soviet forces began to retake the city, and soon Roth himself was one of the numerous casualties. The battle raged into the night, and it was only when the main railway station was captured that the Soviets were able to claim victory. Various counterattacks would occur throughout the following month as the Wehrmacht attempted to push the Red Army back, all to no avail. The Dnieper Offensive ended with the Wehrmacht forced to restabilise their front further west.

1944 began with Operation January Thunder, a fight for the western approaches of Leningrad, which itself would be liberated later in the month. For eight months, the Soviet Leningrad Front would be engaged in various battles pushing the Wehrmacht back across the Narva River. Meanwhile, Soviet forces were simultaneously occupied with an attempt to retake the strategically important Crimea.

Following the continued Soviet offensives, the 17th German Army had found itself blocked and alone in the Crimea. Despite being isolated and cut off from the rest of their army, German forces had been able to keep control due to their ability to maintain supplies via the Black Sea. For five months, the Wehrmacht were largely ignored by Soviet forces but were ordered not to retreat. The loss of the strategically important Crimea could put Romanian oilfields at risk of Soviet airstrikes and also negatively sway the attitude of Turkey against the war. Despite countless pleas to abandon the area, Hitler's response was unwavering - Germany would not retreat. The Soviet attack began on 8 April and by the 16th they had reached Sevastopol. In a darkly ironic twist, German soldiers found themselves forced to defend the same fortress that Soviet troops had been trapped in previously. The fall of Odessa in the

Yalta Mountains, which was the main German supply link, coupled with depleting numbers and supplies, soon made it impossible for the German 17th Army to defend Sevastopol any longer. On 5 May at 9.30am a massive Soviet attack began involving artillery and aerial bombardment. By 6.30pm the German army had suffered

some 5,000 casualties. Finally relenting, Hitler ordered the retreat.

The subsequent mass evacuation of the Crimea during April and May of 1944 was the Romanian navy's single largest operation during the entirety of the war. During the final phase of the evacuation some 30,000 Axis troops were escorted out of the area while under constant attack from their Soviet counterparts. On 12 May, the final Axis units still in occupation of the Crimea were finally wiped out. Some 57,000 German and Romanian soldiers, the majority of which drowned, were lost during the entire operation.

Yet the Soviet assault was far from over. On 21 June 1944, almost three years to the day after German forces had first invaded the Soviet Union, they began an operation intended to push into Belorussia across

## LENINGRAD LIBERATED!

After enduring nearly 900 days in a state of siege, the great city was finally freed

Since 8 September 1941, the city of Leningrad had found itself encircled by German forces and under a constant state of siege. As the Axis powers advanced, heavy fortifications had been built and a blockade began, designed to starve the city into submission. While evacuations had allowed roughly a million children, elderly or those suffering long-term illnesses to escape, a further 2 million were left to attempt to survive the ongoing attack.

As many as a third of the population, possibly 1 million citizens, are said to have perished from starvation, disease or through continued aerial bombardment. However, in January 1943 Soviet troops were able to seize a land bridge from the Wehrmacht, which was used to deliver food and supplies. The city's populous seemed reinvigorated, with a renewed spirit of resistance and factories springing into life, producing ammunition for the oncoming confrontation.

In early 1944, as Hitler's forces found themselves continuously pushed back, the Red Army was able to make a renewed assault. On 27 January, 872 days since it had started, the siege was lifted permanently. Almost immediately spontaneous celebrations began and the city's guns fired in a victory salute. Grabbing bottles of vodka, the survivors took to the streets in jubilation. One citizen stated that, "We sang, cried, laughed; but it was sad all the same - the losses were just too large. A great work had ended, impossible deeds had been done, we all felt that... but we also felt confusion. How should we live now? For what purpose?"







## DOWNFALL

a 450-mile-long line of advance. Codenamed Operation Bagration, the offensive was named after Pytor Bagration, a beloved Tsarist general during the Napoleonic Wars. Utilising four army group fronts comprising 118 rifle divisions, 13 artillery divisions, eight tank and mechanised corps and six cavalry units, the operation assembled a total of 2.3 million troops for the advance. In the days preceding the operation, partisan groups commenced a series of attacks on German supply lines, detonating over 10,500 demolition charges in a single night alone, destroying bridges and railway lines.

The attack began at 5am, with a massive aerial bombardment as the Soviet forces attempted to weaken the strongest German positions. The 3rd Panzer Army had secreted itself in marshy terrain surrounding the city of Vitebsk and now found itself subjected to an intense artillery and rocket bombardment. Units also attempted to create holes in the 3rd Army's salient line, launching a series of coordinated attacks. On 23 June, with the 3rd Army weakened, the full weight of the Soviet offensive began. Hitler had designated Vitebsk a 'fortified city' (to be held to the last man), and by nightfall on the 24th, two German divisions were completely encircled. It would only be a matter of days before the Red Army was able to completely wipe out the German 3rd Army - some 28,000 men. Meanwhile, the 4th Army struggled to hold key positions on the Minsk-Moscow road under a constant onslaught of tanks fitted with mine-rollers and flamethrowers under the command of General Ivan Chernyakhovsky. By the evening of 26 June the German commanders decided to retreat to more defensible lines, opening the road to the Red Army.

It was on this date that Field Marshal Ernst Busch, in charge of German operations in the area, flew to Germany for a desperate meeting with Hitler. His intention was to attempt to force the Führer to relent on the no-retreat policy, which had so far served only to condemn large portions of his army to death. Enraged, Hitler instead replaced Busch, with Field Marshal Walther Model made head of the Führer's forces in the area. The day after his arrival, the city of Borisov at the Berezina crossing point fell, resulting in 40,000 German troops becoming trapped east of Bobruisk. This too would fall on 29 June, and some 50,000 German soldiers were slaughtered in under a week by the 1st Belorussian Front alone. On 2 July, Hitler would finally concede that Minsk was lost and the remaining Axis troops were evacuated. With Minsk now under their control, the Soviet forces expanded their initial goals and were ordered to push forward towards the Lithuanian and Polish borders.

Occurring at the same time as Operation Bagration, Soviet forces began a fourth offensive. Named the Lvov-Sandomierz Offensive, this time the intention was to push further into Poland and Ukraine and capture the cities of Lublin and Lvov. On 13 July, Marshall Ivan Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front attacked the battered remains of Model's

## OPERATION SPRING AWAKENING

Adolf Hitler's last roll of the dice to regain control of the Eastern Front

On 6 March 1945, as the Axis powers began to succumb to the might of the Allies, Adolf Hitler launched what would be his final offensive of the war - Operation Spring Awakening. Its intention was to secure the Hungarian oilfields surrounding Lake Balaton and halt the continued Soviet assault towards Vienna. The responsibility for this was given to the 6th Panzer Army, trusted divisions of the SS, commanded by Sepp Dietrich. Troops were ordered to remove their armbands and special code names were given in order to keep their moving to the Eastern Front a secret.

Once there, Operation Spring Awakening proved to be initially successful, and some 250 miles of land was recaptured relatively quickly. However, as the German army began to prepare its next attack it became bogged down by a period known as 'rasputitsa', a point during spring in which the thawed ground turns to extremely wet mud, which resulted in German immobility for three or four weeks. Despite a request to postpone the attack, Dietrich's Panzers were ordered to continue, and soon tanks were sinking up to their turrets and troops were left without armoured support.

Despite some success on 9 March, when German troops were able to breach Soviet defences, they were well short of their expected goals, and by 12 March the Panzers were fighting against a Red Army offensive. Soon the German forces were cut off, with their left flank dangerously exposed. As sections of Red Army troops moved out of Budapest, it soon became clear that the intention was to attack the Wehrmacht from the rear and the German troops retreated. By 19 March, the Red Army was able to recapture all territories lost in the short offensive.



General Sepp Dietrich,  
commander of the 6th  
Panzer Army



## THE PUSH TO BERLIN



forces, beginning with a heavy artillery bombardment. Over successive days, the 3rd Soviet Army found itself initially unable to make much progress against the 4th Panzers commanded by Colonel Josef Harpe, but by 18 July they had pushed them back along the entire front. By 20 July a wedge had been driven between the 1st Panzer and 4th Panzer armies, and by the 27th the 1st Panzer Army was forced to abandon Lvov, retreating into the Carpathians. Meanwhile, the 4th Panzer Army found itself pushed into southern Poland, where it would remain until January 1945. Using the shattered remains of his army, Model desperately attempted to stop the oncoming advance, but it was a lost cause. By August the Red Army had reached the outskirts of Warsaw and Model had been transferred to the Western Front. In just over a single month the German forces had lost some 350,000 men.

On 12 January 1945, the Red Army began its advance further into Poland, crossing the Vistula in the south and two days later striking from the Narew River north of Warsaw. So successful was this advance that the Soviets were able to punch through the German defences and move west at a rate of some 19 to 25 miles per day. During this period they seized the Baltic states, Danzig, East Prussia and Poznan, pushing directly into Germany itself. Hitler's forces desperately attempted to push the Soviet forces back on numerous fronts, hoping to end the assault in Budapest. They quickly failed, and on 13 February (the same day they were able to conquer Vienna) the Hungarian capital fell to the rampant Red Army. With Soviet forces lined up along the Oder River, Stalin's main objective soon became the capture of Berlin itself.

**Above German prisoners captured by troops of the Belorussian Fronts are marched through the streets of Moscow in July 1944**





## DOWNFALL

# WARSAW RISES

On 1 August 1944, Europe's largest underground resistance, the Polish Home Army, rose up against the Germans as men, women and children fought to liberate Warsaw

**WRITTEN BY MARIANNA BUKOWSKI**



In Poland the subject of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 is seen from many different perspectives and, like all battles, has its own specific circumstances: military, political, social and - seen from Poland's history of uprisings - cultural. Yet, while no longer suppressed, as it was in the bleak years of communism and the Cold War, it still remains a battle relatively unknown outside of Poland today.

Fought from 1 August to 2 October 1944, the outcome of the 63-day battle was a tragedy. An estimated 18,000 Polish insurgents lost their lives and between 180,000-200,000 civilians died during the uprising. Warsaw became a city of ruins. However, despite the catastrophic end, it is also a story of tragic beauty, heroism and fierce resistance against the odds.

### A HISTORY OF UPRISINGS

With the German and Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939, Polish resistance to the occupiers was instant. Poland had only relatively recently regained its independence at the end of World War I, following 123 years of Russian, Prussian and Austrian partitions, and building underground secret networks against an enemy occupier was something of a second nature. Generations of Poles had fought for independence - in the Kosciuszko Rising in 1794, with Napoleon for the Duchy of Warsaw from 1807-1815, the November Uprising of 1830, the January Uprising of 1863 and in Piłsudski's Legions in WWI, all fighting for the rebirth of the Polish state.

By 1940, Poland's armed resistance movement had formed as the Związek Walki Zbrojnej (Union of Armed Struggle) and developed into the Armia Krajowa (AK or







## WARSAW RISES



Home Army) in 1942 - the biggest underground army in occupied Europe. By 1944, an estimated 400,000 soldiers were carrying out military training, diversionary activities, sabotage operations and intelligence gathering in preparation for an armed national insurgency.

### OCCUPATION

The occupation of Warsaw, Poland's capital city and home to around 1.3 million inhabitants in 1939, was particularly brutal from the very start. Germans confiscated property, renamed streets and put up "Nur für Deutsche" (only for Germans) signs across the city. Every citizen was forced to carry their 'kennkarte' ID card, work and residence permits to show any German official on patrol at any given time.

The German authorities imposed strict food rationing. The average adult in Warsaw lost ten kilograms in weight during the occupation. Monetary depreciation meant loss of any pre-war savings and disproportionately low wages, creating an extortionate black market. Mass arrests and executions of civil servants, doctors, teachers, lawyers, scientists and artists increased and continued throughout the occupation, such as the massacres at Wawer, 1939, Palmiry, 1939/1940, Kabacki Forest, 1939/1940, and Sekocinski Forest in 1942.

From October 1941, under the penalty of death, Jews were no longer allowed to leave the Warsaw Ghetto. Helping or hiding Jews was also punishable by death, not only for the one responsible but also for their entire family. Despite this, many still offered any assistance they could. In 1942, Jan Karski delivered an impassioned plea on behalf of Poland's Jews to Allied officials in London and to American President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1943, the remaining Jewish population revolted in the heroic but doomed Ghetto Uprising.

In the autumn of 1943 SS-Brigadeführer Franz Kutschera, head of the SS and police in Warsaw, introduced public street executions. The police were allowed to kill anyone at will, on the spot. Round-ups, mass executions and forced deportations as slave labour to Germany became so frequent that when someone left their house they would not know if they would ever come back.

It is impossible for anyone that has not lived through it to understand what it really means to live in constant fear of arrest, torture and death. This terror created a strong unity against the Germans, and sometimes with total strangers, when a glance, a word or some small gesture from someone that just happened to pass on the street could save a stranger's life.

### CLASS OF 1920

Many of the young soldiers that would come to fight in the uprising of 1944 were born in the 1920s, and they are known in Poland as the 'Class of 1920'. Born free in the Second Polish Republic, they felt a strong sense of





## DOWNFALL

patriotic duty and civic engagement, and as they came of age during the brutality of the occupation, they felt it was their responsibility to fight for Poland's freedom.

As German authorities closed all secondary schools and universities, forbidding Polish history, geography and literature to be taught, teachers took up the struggle against the occupier by providing clandestine study groups. It is estimated that 90,000 students attended these secret schools held in private homes taught by about 5,500 teachers in 1943-1944.

From a young age many joined the 'Grey Ranks' and were very active in the scout movement, learning first-aid skills and military drills. Teenagers spent their free time on conspiratorial activities and small-scale sabotage. Painting the anchor symbol of 'Poland Fighting' on a wall of a house or busy street was very dangerous but boosted morale immensely in the fight against the occupiers.

The iconic PW anchor symbol for 'Polska Walczaca' (Poland Fighting) was designed by Anna Smolenska, a scout and arts history student who would perish in Auschwitz in 1943.

Commanded by Brigadier General Emil August Fieldorf 'Nil' (Nile), the Home Army's Directorate of Diversionary Operations, the KEDYW, consisted of elite units and undertook all manner of diversionary and sabotage activities, such as train derailment, arson, blowing up bridges, planting bombs inside SS barracks, sabotage work at German factories and freeing prisoners held by the ruthless Gestapo.

One of the KEDYW's special units, named 'Agat' (Anti-Gestapo), and later 'Pegaz' and 'Parasol', carried out the assassinations of exceptionally brutal Nazi officials. The first successful liquidation was of the sadistic deputy commandant of Pawiak Prison, SS-Oberscharführer Franz Bürkl, in September 1943. The Sten gun used to kill Bürkl was carried to the location in a specially constructed violin case. One of the assassins, Bronisław Pietraszkiewicz, pseudonym 'Lot' (Flight), was to become the leader of 'Operation Kutschera', assassinating

SS-Brigadeführer Franz Kutschera in February 1944.

Similar to the better-known killing of Reinhard Heydrich in Prague, Kutschera died on location. Just as the mass reprisal killings in Lidice had followed Heydrich's death, 300 people were shot in Warsaw by the Germans in reprisal for the Poles' assassination of Kutschera.

Escaping after the action, one of the cars used by the assassins ran into a German checkpoint at the Vistula bridge, and two of the assassins jumped over the balustrade into the freezing Vistula River. 'Lot' escaped in a second car, but having been wounded during the action, he died later, after surgery, from his wounds. He was only 22 years old.

### W-HOUR

By June 1944 the Russian offensive in Poland had started, this time on the side of the Allies. The Germans were in retreat and had begun to evacuate Warsaw. Reports were coming in that the Red Army was approaching the Vistula from the eastern suburbs of Warsaw. While diplomatic relations between Poland and the Soviets had not been re-established since the Katyn massacre, when 22,000 Polish officers and intellectuals had been executed by the NKVD in 1940, Home Army Commander General 'Bor' Komorowski was convinced the Soviet attack was continuing towards Germany.

After consulting with the government delegate Jan 'Sobol' Jankowski, he decided to start the uprising to liberate the capital, therefore safeguarding the sovereignty of the Polish state before the Red Army entered. In the words of Jankowski, "We wanted to be free and owe our freedom to nobody."

'W-hour' was set for 5.00pm on Tuesday, 1 August 1944. The uprising was expected to last three days, or a week at most. Victory was very far from certain. Even so, most Varsovians welcomed the Warsaw Uprising with enthusiasm - for the first time in five years of occupation they had a chance to be free. "We were ready to give absolutely everything for freedom," said Wanda Traczyk-Stawska, a 17-year-old girl scout.

Many of the scout groups and units that had formed during the occupation became some of the most famous formations of the rising: Battalion Zoska, Parasol, Koszta, Odwet. With many soldiers being so young, between 16 and 24 years old, the bonds they forged would last for life. Many would choose heroic-sounding or mythological noms de guerre, but some would be nicknamed by their friends. The boys in Traczyk-Stawska's unit named her 'Paczek', meaning rosebud or doughnut. Another characteristic of the uprising was that boys and girls would fight together, side by side.

Traczyk-Stawska would become one of the women who took up arms against the enemy and fought as a soldier in a unit under the direct disposition of General Antoni Chrusciel, whose nom de guerre was 'Monter' and who was in command of all the fighting forces in Warsaw.

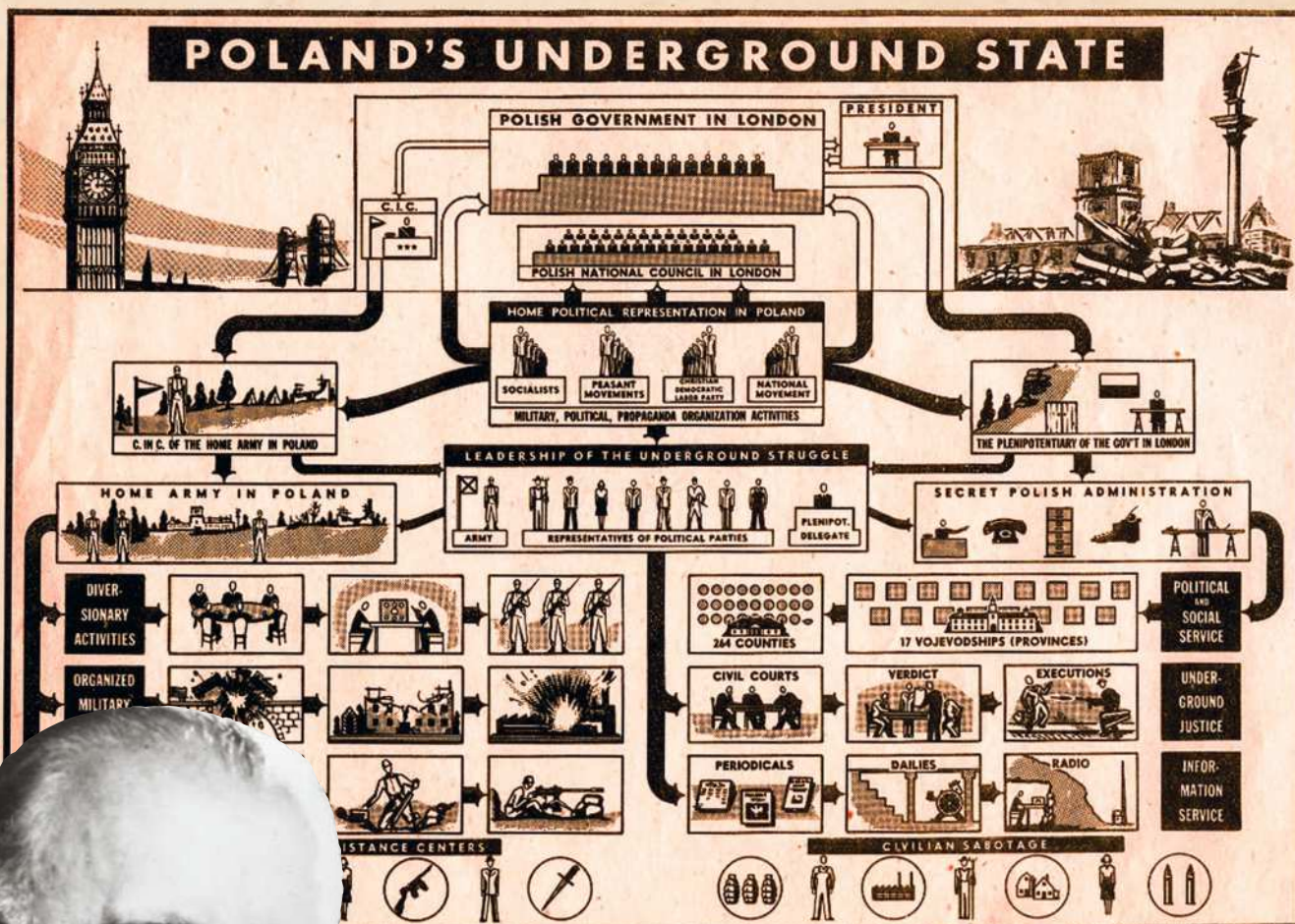
17-year-old Wanda Traczyk-Stawska firing her 'Błyskawica' gun during the uprising







## WARSAW RISES



## GOVERNING IN EXILE AND SECRET

As Germany and the USSR occupied Poland's territories, the Polish state lived on in secret, governed by the Polish government-in-exile

Recognised by the Western Allies, the Polish president, government and commander-in-chief at first held office in Paris, then, after the fall of France in 1940, in London. Formed under Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief General Sikorski, Poland's armed resistance movement was organised as ZWZ Union of Armed Struggle in 1940. It became the AK Home Army in 1942 – the biggest underground army in occupied Europe.

In Poland, the plenipotentiary delegate to the government in London held the highest authority, directing all clandestine civil administration. This included the judicial system, with courts that conducted trials

and passed verdicts, including death penalties for traitors and collaborators. Clandestine radio stations informed the West of events in Poland.

Underground printing presses published newspapers and leaflets, providing vital information and helping to keep up morale. Over 700 press titles were published during the occupation. As German authorities closed all secondary schools and universities, teachers took up the struggle against the occupiers by providing clandestine study groups. Many teenagers were also active in the scout movement, learning skills that would prove vital for a chance of survival before the war's end.

Władysław Sikorski was prime minister of the Polish government-in-exile until his death in 1943





## DOWNFALL

**Below** Wanda Traczyk-Stawska in 2015 holding a copy of *Portrait of a Soldier*, a film about her time fighting in Warsaw



**Above** Members of the Zoska Battalion. The armband marking the Home Army fighters can clearly be seen

**Below** German captives, made to wear marked uniforms by Polish resistance fighters



According to Bór-Komorowski, the Home Army strength amounted to nearly 40,000 underground soldiers in Warsaw. Today it's estimated that on 1 August 25,000 soldiers took up the struggle and, as more joined in, the number would rise to nearly 50,000. However, only around ten per cent of them had guns. Every imaginable weapon that could be found was used. One of the most recognised guns of the rising was the 9mm sub-machine gun 'Błyskawica', meaning 'lightning', that was designed by Polish engineers and assembled in underground workshops. Much would depend on taking weapons off the enemy and on the supply of ammunition, of which there was a great shortage from the start.

In comparison, at the time of the outbreak of the rising, the German garrison in Warsaw had almost 20,000 well-armed and highly trained soldiers, yet at first the Germans sustained heavy losses.

### SOLDIERS OF THE RESISTANCE

A Home Army soldier's uniform was a red and white armband. Although the uprising started in the summer heat of August, those who were able to prepare dressed in what suitably durable clothing they had. Many soldiers wore a mixture of civilian and any military clothing that they could find, making each soldier's uniform rather individual and unique. But as the battle went on civilian clothing tore and wore out fast.

When the Home Army secured larger areas they also took over German warehouses and storage facilities, and





## WARSAW RISES

so large quantities of German uniforms came into their possession, which they would use. Any soldier will attest to the importance of wearing boots and a helmet, as well as clothes with pockets and belts in battle. German belts with an eagle swastika on the buckle were worn upside down. Photographs of young smiling nurses and couriers wearing Waffen-SS camouflage anoraks over summer dresses and sandals create a striking contrast.

Ask any veteran soldier, and they will likely say that the bravest in battle were the nurses and first-aid girls. They would run straight into the raging battlefield with stretchers, and under fire from Germans they would try to save the lives not only of Polish soldiers but also of severely wounded Germans.

Couriers and liaison girls were vital in coordinating information between different units, which was exceptionally dangerous, as it meant having to run through enemy territory in order to do so. Unarmed due to the lack of weapons, they had no guns to protect themselves - when captured, they would often be raped before they were executed.

Adam Borkiewicz was the first historian of the uprising. In the

opening lines of his book are the now legendary last words of courier Maria Comer, who upon capture was asked, "Bist du Banditin?" (Are you a bandit?), to which she replied, "I am a soldier of the Home Army", before she was executed on the spot.

Recognised by the Allies as a combat force, the Home Army was protected under the Geneva Convention. Yet the Germans killed Home Army soldiers as "bandits and terrorists", and consistently broke the rules of war with the continuous mass murder of civilians.

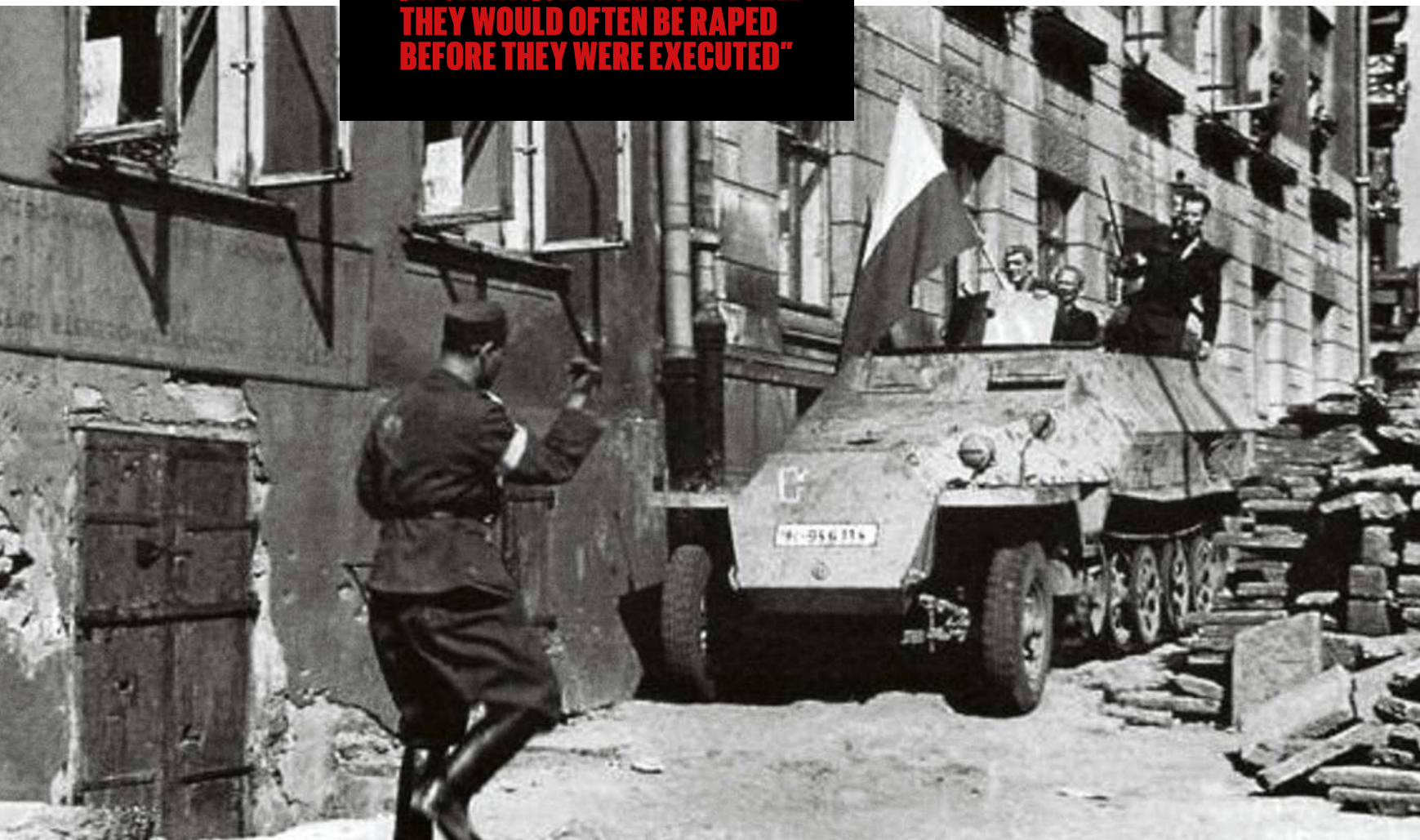
### CIVILIAN FRONT LINE

As news of the Warsaw Uprising reached Himmler, he appointed the command in Warsaw to Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, chief of German anti-partisan formations. On Himmler's order all combatants and non-combatants, including women and children, were to be shot and Warsaw was to be razed to the ground.

Under the command of SS-Gruppenführer Reinefarth, the notorious RONA brigades of Kaminski and Dirlewanger started the assault on the Warsaw neighbourhoods of Ochota and Wola on

**"COURIERS AND LIAISON GIRLS WERE VITAL IN COORDINATING INFORMATION. WHEN CAPTURED THEY WOULD OFTEN BE RAPED BEFORE THEY WERE EXECUTED"**

**Below Home Army soldiers relied on captured weapons, vehicles and ammunition. Here they can be seen in a captured Sd.Kfz 251 vehicle**







## DOWNFALL

5 August. When they advanced, they would use women and children as 'human shields' in front of their tanks. As mass rape and systematic murder of civilians continued, during the course of a few days over 40,000 civilians were slaughtered.

The mass killings in Ochota and Wola count among the worst atrocities of the war. This only reinforced the Home Army soldiers' belief that now the rising had started, there was no turning back - it was a battle to the end. Every street, every house, was fought for.

The Germans used heavy rocket launchers, which civilians nicknamed 'cows' due to the moaning sound they made when the missiles were launched. People caught in their range as they exploded became 'living torches' coated in flammable liquid. Another terrifying German weapon was the so-called 'Goliath', a small remote-controlled tank filled with explosives.

Many civilians lived in basements throughout the uprising and only went out on street level when absolutely necessary, moving through underground passages and basement tunnels created by demolishing the walls between cellars. The longer the rising went on, the harder their situation became.

At times, in certain areas the relationship between the civilian population and Home Army soldiers became understandably strained. Nevertheless, they held out. The truth is that without the support of the civilian population the uprising could not have continued. It was the civilians that helped to set up and worked in hospitals treating the wounded, built barricades, cooked food and collected water, put out fires and provided shelter for soldiers. It was with their help that the battle could continue.

### BATTLEFIELD WARSAW

The insurgents adopted defensive tactics and achieved significant success in the city centre, capturing the PAST state telephone company building, the Holy Cross Church and the police headquarters. They also mounted offensive actions in the Żoliborz area, attempted assaults on the railway station and tried to establish a link between the city centre and the old town area. Unfortunately, these attempts proved unsuccessful and became some of the bloodiest battles of the uprising.

The insurgents ultimately failed to capture the most essential military targets and were locked in an uneven battle against continuous German reinforcements of heavy weapons, which were used to destroy buildings and Polish positions with artillery fire supported by air raids.

The Germans systematically killed civilians following any retreat by the Home Army. Knowing that civilians would be murdered once the Home Army had been forced to abandon its positions was the absolute worst part about the uprising, said Traczyk-Stawska. "A soldier, when he is firing, when he is in battle, he does not feel pain even when he is wounded," she said. "Pain comes later, and even when a soldier is dying, then that death is a very

different situation - compared to civilians, who suffer much worse deaths than soldiers. A soldier has a different mindset. He is armed. He is fighting. He is in a state of euphoria and the adrenaline is very high. But civilians... they were dragged out and executed... defenceless." The suffering of civilians is something that Wanda Traczyk-Stawska thinks about constantly to this day.

Home Army soldiers were a motley crew. One soldier in Traczyk-Stawska's unit, 'Kruczek', forever the avid reader, would crawl along a torn barricade on his back, his jacket bulging up, filled with books that he had found along the way in some bombed out, abandoned buildings. Another soldier in their unit was unwilling to be separated from his wife and child and brought them along with him - crawling through the torn barricade, the wife would carry their wrapped up new-born baby in her mouth, like a lioness. Scenes like this would seem improbable in a film, and yet in real life they happened. The Warsaw Uprising was filled with many surreal or miracle-like experiences.

### THE FALL

After fierce fighting, German units captured the last defences of the old town on 2 September. With the fall of the old town no single building was left standing, and the conditions of the insurgents worsened with each day. The catastrophe forced Colonel Karol Ziemski to begin an evacuation. Every attempt to break through the German lines and connect with the city centre had failed, and the only way out of the siege was through the sewer tunnels. The municipal sewer system ran under most of the city and had been used by couriers throughout the uprising. The conditions in the sewers were very difficult: insurgents waded in darkness through toxic waste, with the risk of Germans hearing them from above and releasing poison gas or explosives into the tunnels. It took around four hours to cover 1.2 miles.

For two days, over 5,000 insurgents escaped through the sewers. On 2 September the last Home Army units left the old town. Behind them they left some 40,000-50,000 civilians. The old, sick and wounded were shot by the Germans, and the rest were transported to Mauthausen and Sachsenhausen.

This is one of the most tragic chapters of the uprising. The fall of the old town also prevented the city centre insurgents from connecting with units in Żoliborz and Kampinos Forest and allowed German forces to concentrate on suppressing each individual stronghold of resistance. Despite the insurgents' great determination, the Germans had an overwhelming advantage, both in manpower and military resources. The Karl-Gerät 040 siege gun caused huge devastation, along with shelling by German artillery and the Luftwaffe, which made nearly 1,400 sorties over Warsaw, fighting the insurgents and destroying the city.

In the end, all the insurgents could do was to hold onto their positions. With time the conflict reached a





## WARSAW RISES







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virtual stalemate. Despite the brave efforts of Allied airmen, the Warsaw Airlift had not been successful. The route from Italy was too difficult, and by the time some airdrops were conducted most supplies fell into enemy hands. Churchill couldn't persuade Stalin to give Allied flights landing rights in the USSR to help get supplies and ammunition to the insurgents in time. Western assistance had failed. The conditions for civilians became unbearable and the Home Army had no resources left with which to fight. The situation was unsustainable. It is still remarkable that the rising lasted for as long as it did – 63 days.

### CAPITULATION

The last shot of the uprising was fired on 2 October. In the final capitulation terms, agreed between representatives of the Home Army command and Von dem Bach-Zelewski, Home Army soldiers were to be treated as POWs according to the Geneva Convention. Civilians were not to be killed or persecuted.

Around 11,600 Home Army soldiers surrendered, along with about 2,000 women. Wanda Traczyk-Stawska was one of the 1,800 women that would end up as a POW in Stalag VI-C Oberlangen, where in a beautiful twist of fate, they would later be liberated by the Polish First Armoured Division led by General Maczek.

Elsewhere, many Home Army soldiers would be freed or escape German captivity and continue to fight before the war's end.

The mass evacuation of the civilian population from Warsaw, which the Germans insisted upon, is an unprecedented event in Europe's history and remains one of the most tragic and haunting scenes of the war. First taken to a transit camp, in contradiction to the capitulation agreement, over 100,000 Varsovians were sent as slave labour to Germany, and tens of thousands were sent to concentration camps, including Mauthausen, Ravensbrück and Auschwitz. The exact number of people who perished in the uprising will remain unknown.

An estimated 18,000 Polish insurgents lost their lives, while German deaths are estimated to be similar. It was the civilians that suffered the most incomprehensible loss: between 180,000-200,000 civilians died during the 63 days of battle. At the Warsaw Insurgents Cemetery in Wola, over 100,000 people are buried, most of them in mass graves.

### THE LANDSCAPE AFTER BATTLE

During the three months that followed, the demolition of Warsaw was completed methodically, house by house, on Adolf Hitler's orders. Around 85-90 per cent of the city was destroyed.

As the Red Army finally entered Warsaw in January 1945 they 'liberated' a pile of rubble. In their wake, the NKVD arriving from the east had been disarming and arresting Polish insurgents all along. Many of the labour

and concentration camps established under German occupation retained similar functions under the new Soviet occupiers. Poland's borders were changed and fell under the Soviet sphere of influence. The legitimate Polish government-in-exile in London didn't return to Poland, where Stalin had a Soviet-friendly government installed.

The geopolitical landscape had changed – the rest of the world moved on. However, some Polish soldiers continued to fight, joining WiN and different partisan groups in forests. From a more academic point of view, fighting at this stage may seem irrational, if not suicidal, but it had an emotional logic. In Poland, one occupying force had simply been replaced by another. Some describe this period as a civil war. The last of the 'doomed soldiers', Józef Franczak, was killed in 1963.

Even those who tried to rebuild or start 'normal' civilian lives were rarely able to do so: the majority of Home Army soldiers were persecuted and imprisoned at some point, and many were executed in the years of Stalinist repression that followed. Polish soldiers returning from the West did so at their own peril, and they too were often arrested and prosecuted as 'traitors'.

Reading about the lives and profoundly unjust fates of Emil 'Nil' Fieldorf, executed in 1953, or Captain Witold Pilecki, executed in 1948, and so many others, is heartbreaking. But in the years that would follow, speaking publicly about the Warsaw Uprising was not allowed. "Not a word about the rising. Not a word about the Home Army. As if we never existed," Wanda Traczyk-Stawska recalled. Only with the fall of communism did this change.

In Poland today the rising is a subject of constant, passionate debate and public discourse, yet it still remains relatively unknown in the West, despite the many films and books that have documented it.

The Warsaw Uprising and its aftermath remains not only crucial to understanding World War II and Poland today, but it is also part of Europe's shared history: it is the story of the Allies who fought for freedom – and lost.

**The Warsaw Uprising involved many combatants, including women and children. These Polish boys participated in the fighting**



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## DOWNFALL







## THE FALL OF THE THIRD REICH



# ENDGAME: THE FALL OF THE THIRD REICH

As millions of Soviet troops massed on the outskirts of the city, the remnants of the Third Reich's armies prepared to defend Berlin to the last man

**I**n October 1941, four months after the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union, Adolf Hitler stood before a packed auditorium at the Sportpalast, Berlin. The largest meeting hall in the city, with some 14,000 spectators, was festooned with swastika banners and further 'Nazified' by way of a dramatically lit, 20-metre-wide theatre prop in the shape of a golden eagle. It hovered over Der Führer, seemingly radiating power and purity. This was Hitler's altar and before it he delivered the following sermon.

"Today, I can say that the enemy is broken and will never rise again! Her power had been assembled against Europe, and would have been a second storm of Genghis Khan. That this danger has been averted, we owe to the bravery, endurance and sacrifice of the German soldier!" His histrionic version of events was met with fanatical applause. His enemy, though, was far from broken.

By May 1945, the 'Sieg Heils' that had echoed around that room had been replaced by the chilling war cries of Soviet infantrymen as they smashed their way into Hitler's sacred temple and onto the very stage he had preached from. 'Ura!' they screamed as they hunted down the last of his disciples holding out in the building, going about their murderous work with bayonet, grenade and rifle butt. The Red Army wanted vengeance for the atrocities unleashed upon their people.

For the soldiers of the Red Army that stage, more so even than the Reichstag, symbolised Nazi power. Its capture meant not just the end of the war but also the death of National Socialism - the ideology that had been responsible for the slaughter of 27 million Soviet citizens. For the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, however, the real prize was the capture of the prestigious German capital itself.





## DOWNFALL

**Right** The final offensive against Berlin opened with a bombardment of the Seelow Heights by some 9,000 Soviet guns

**Below** Hitler's mesmeric speeches were heightened by the theatricality of their setting. His followers frequently responded rapturously





## THE FALL OF THE THIRD REICH

### HITLER'S LAST LINE OF DEFENCE

The boy fanatics and citizen militia of Berlin's Volkssturm

#### FOUNDATION

By the end of 1944 the German war machine was running on empty, its manpower almost spent. Hitler ordered all German men aged between 16 and 60 to join Volkssturm units, and with the regular army disgraced by defeat, overall command was given to Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, who announced the birth of the "People's Storm" over the radio waves on 18 October while a studio audience sang "Volk ans Gewehr!" – "People to Arms!"

#### RECRUITMENT

With most adult men already serving in the Wehrmacht, most of the total 6 million-strong Volkssturm were old men – with 1.4 million physically unfit and suitable only for guard duty. Approximately 600,000 were 16-19-year-old members of the Hitler Youth, with some volunteers as young as ten. Even the women of the Nazi Women's League were drafted in to provide rear-echelon support. On 23 March 1945, the women were issued firearms. Of Berlin's 41,000 defenders, 24,000 of them were Volkssturm, with 18,000 of that number part of the 'Clausewitz Levy' mobilised from essential war workers.

#### TRAINING

Volkssturm recruits were rushed through a 48-hour training programme covering the use of rifles, Panzerfaust and Panzerschreck anti-tank weapons and grenades. If the situation warranted it they were also schooled in the use of pistols, sub-machine guns and even landmines.

#### EQUIPMENT

Units assigned to guard duty were expected to use hunting rifles or weapons taken from the enemy, but even combat units found supplies hard to come by and some were only issued with a trench spade. In Berlin, supplies were so scarce that units were issued with Italian or Danish rifles and only a couple of rounds each. Only Panzerfaust rocket launchers seemed plentiful.



Newly mobilised members of the Volkssturm and their weapons

#### UNIFORM

An order issued on 1 December 1944 required recruits provide their own, resulting in a mixture of paramilitary, Hitlerjugend, police and even old World War I uniforms, but many had to make do with cast-offs, captured British fatigues or simply civilian clothes. All insignia had to be removed except Volkssturm rank pips on the collar and the black Volkssturm armband on the upper left sleeve. The lack of a consistent uniform led to many facing summary execution as guerrillas by the Red Army.

#### LEADERSHIP

Command roles in the Volkssturm were often held by senior members of the Hitler Youth, civilian police and non-combat paramilitary groups such as the motoring association NSKK, the flying club NSFK and the military engineering/slave labour force Organisation Todt. The Berlin District Volkssturm was under the direct command of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, who was also Gauleiter, or head, of the regional branch of the Nazi Party.

#### EFFECTIVENESS

While many Volkssturm units were as farcical as you'd expect from such an ad hoc collection of OAPs and

inexperienced ideologues, some of them – such as the Siemensstadt Volkssturm Battalion 3/115 fighting in the eastern suburbs of the city – held out until the surrender. The Hitlerjugend – representing a generation that had known only National Socialism – fought with a level of zeal that terrified even battle-hardened soldaten, and one Soviet account describes a column of 400 Hitlerjugend marching down Kolonnenstrasse toward them as if they were on parade. The stupefied 5th Shock Army paused briefly before opening fire. Hitlerjugend 'tank-hunting units' armed with Panzerfausts terrorised the Soviet advance through the Wilmersdorf District, while a counter-attack launched from the Ruhleben U-Bahn saw 1,000 German troops reinforced by 2,000 Hitlerjugend – many completely unarmed – that actually drove back the advance of the 55 Guards Tank Brigade.

Perhaps the most infamous tribute to their tragic fanaticism was on 23 April, when Volkssturm battalions made up entirely of Hitler Youth tried to hold the Pichelsdorf bridges across the Havel River for a relief army that never arrived – one of the many phantoms commanded by Germany's ailing despot as he raged inside his bunker. 5,000 boys in adult uniforms and oversized helmets fought for five days against the Red Army advance, with 4,500 of them killed or wounded.

### KEY PLAYERS

Thousands died as Berlin fell, many believing their cause was a noble one. These are the men they followed



#### GEORGY ZHUKOV USSR 1896–1974

The key Soviet commander, having driven the Germans from Moscow, defeated them at Stalingrad and routed them at Kursk, Zhukov was known as 'the man who never lost a battle'. While he did capture Berlin, his tactics cost many casualties.



#### GOTTHARD HEINRICI NAZI GERMANY 1886–1971

Considered the best defensive tactician in the Wehrmacht, Heinrici managed to delay the huge Soviet advance at Seelow despite overwhelming odds. A non-Nazi, he bravely refused to carry out Hitler's more suicidal orders, saving numerous lives.



#### IVAN KONEV USSR 1897–1973

As commander of the 1st Ukrainian Front, Konev was encouraged by Stalin – who admired his ruthlessness – to 'race' Zhukov to Berlin. Attacking from the south, his forces were also the first to link up with advancing US troops.



#### HELMUTH WEIDLING NAZI GERMANY 1891–1955

On 22 April, Hitler ordered Weidling's execution. The next day he appointed him commander of Berlin's defence. On learning of his promotion, Weidling said, "I'd rather have been shot."





## DOWNFALL

The idea that the Soviets might seize Berlin and bring an end to World War II in Europe had become a distinct possibility by the start of 1945. The success of the Red Army's January offensive had seen it smash through 300 miles of German-held territory in just 20 days. By 5 February, its troops began to cross the Oder River, the last great natural barrier before Berlin. Once on the other side, however, and just 37 miles outside of Nazi Germany's capital, they stopped.

The Soviet advance had been so rapid and the fighting so intense that the successes had left the Red Army short of ammunition and fuel. It would take more than two months of resupply and reinforcement before it was ready for its final push of the war.

The pause in slaughter gave the Germans time to reorganise too. Reserve units were cobbled together from whatever troops were left and whichever civilians could be press-ganged into service. Wounded soldiers were ordered from their hospital beds and army clerks sent to combat units, while men as old as 60 and boys as young as 13 were drafted into the newly formed Volkssturm militias. Those who refused were executed.

In the end, the Nazi high command managed to sweep together about 760,000 troops. Many were sent to join the 9th Army at Seelow Heights, the highlands east of Berlin, to help build elaborate defences there. In the plains before them as these troops worked, the Soviets gathered together an army of 2.5 million men, more than 6,000 tanks and 40,000 artillery pieces. The clock was ticking on what would be one of the bloodiest showdowns in history. By the time Berlin fell, hundreds of thousands of people lay dead.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill also wanted to capitalise on this brief pause. He saw it as an opportunity for the West to seize both the initiative and Berlin itself. By late March, the Western Allies had crossed the Rhine and were themselves just 60 miles from the city. "If the Russians take Berlin," Churchill warned US President Franklin D. Roosevelt on 1 April, "may this not lead to grave and formidable difficulties in the future?"

Churchill, as it would transpire, was very much focused on the future and what a post-war map of Europe should look like. He urged the Americans to take the city. However, the US high command, under General Dwight D. Eisenhower, wasn't keen. The mauling his troops had taken during the Battle of the Bulge that winter, when Hitler had launched his final counter-offensive in the west, had left him wary. When Eisenhower asked what casualties he could expect if he attacked Berlin, one of his generals told him 100,000. It was an unthinkable figure. Had it transpired, it would have constituted one-fifth of all US casualties for the entire war. Eisenhower instead deferred to Stalin, who told him that Berlin was strategically unimportant and that his efforts would be better focused on preventing the Germans from regrouping in the south. With the spectre of horrific US

### 1 ZHUKOV LAUNCHES SEELOW HEIGHTS OFFENSIVE 16 APRIL, 3AM

After more than two months of intensive preparation, the 1st Belorussian Front under Marshal Zhukov attacks the well-fortified German position at Seelow Heights. The objective is taken after three days of fierce fighting. It proves to be Germany's last significant position of organised resistance to her inevitable defeat.

### 2 ZHUKOV REACHES THE OUTSKIRTS OF BERLIN 20 APRIL, 8PM

After having raced 37 miles from Seelow to the eastern edge of Berlin, Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front announces its arrival with an artillery barrage that continues until the city falls two weeks later.

### 3 THE BATTLE OF HALBE 24 APRIL, 10AM

The 9th Army, escaping from Marshal Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front, is pinned down by SS troops after being mistaken for a Soviet column. The hold-up allows Konev to envelop them. Over the next few days the 9th Army is annihilated.

### 4 BERLIN ENCIRCLED 24 APRIL, 6PM

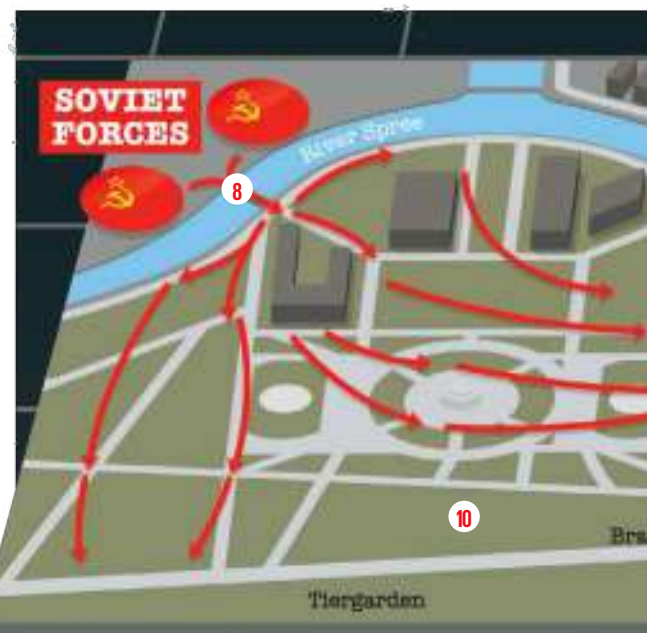
Forward elements of Marshal Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front link up with men from Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front to the west of Berlin. With Marshal Rokossovsky's 2nd Belorussian Front pushing down on it from the north, the Nazi capital finds itself completely surrounded and cut off.

### 5 SOVIET AND US TROOPS MEET 25 APRIL, 4PM

Elements of Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front make contact with men from the US 69th Infantry Division at Torgau on the Elbe, 84 miles southwest of Berlin.

### 6 HITLER'S BUNKER IS SHELLED 27 APRIL, 10AM

Soviet artillerymen on Schlesingerstrasse are ordered to fire on the Reichstag; they comply even though Berlin's so engulfed by flames they can't see it. After hitting their own troops, they switch targets to the Reich Chancellery, where Hitler's bunker is located.



### 7 THE CAPTURE OF TEMPELHOF AIRPORT 28 APRIL, 11AM

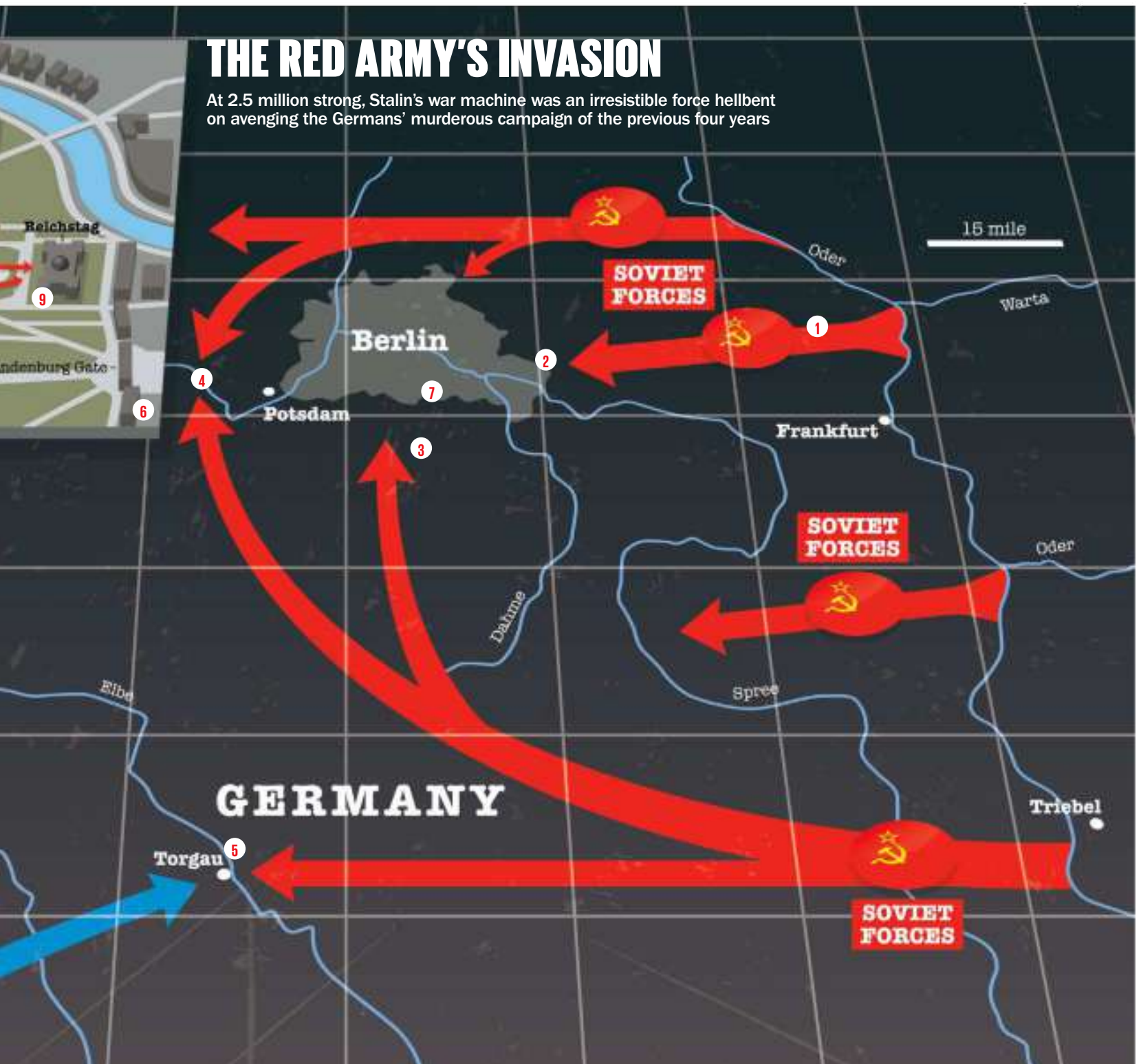
With much of Berlin's southern suburbs now in Soviet hands, Tempelhof airport is seized. With the city completely surrounded, Hitler's last exit route has been closed off. He now knows his fate lies with either death or capture in Berlin.



## THE FALL OF THE THIRD REICH

### THE RED ARMY'S INVASION

At 2.5 million strong, Stalin's war machine was an irresistible force hellbent on avenging the Germans' murderous campaign of the previous four years



#### 8 THE CAPTURE OF THE MOLTKE BRIDGE 28 APRIL, 5PM

This last intact crossing over the River Spree was the gateway into central Berlin. About 5,000 German troops barricaded it at both ends and wired it up for demolition. Soviet forces assault the bridge at dusk and capture it.

#### 9 THE CAPTURE OF THE REICHSTAG BUILDING 30 APRIL, 10.40PM

After two days of fighting, Soviet forces finally place their flag atop the Reichstag in time for May Day, as ordered by Stalin. By 1 May the Reichstag is in Soviet hands, and news of Hitler's suicide prompts the German surrender.

#### 10 KROLL OPERA HOUSE IS CLEARED 30 APRIL, 11.30AM

Soviet infantrymen just 800 metres from the Reichstag are attacked from the rear by SS diehards in the Kroll Opera House. The building is taken after several hours of bitter hand-to-hand fighting.





## DOWNFALL

The Reichstag shortly after the ceasefire. The struggle for control of it had been a titanic fight to the death







## THE FALL OF THE THIRD REICH







## DOWNFALL

casualties looming, Eisenhower was only too glad to take the Soviet ruler's advice.

Yet neither Stalin nor Churchill was being transparent. It had already been agreed at February's Yalta Conference that when the Nazi regime toppled, the Allies would divvy up Berlin between them. So why then did it matter to Churchill who took the city first? Similarly, if Berlin was strategically unimportant, why was Stalin so keen for the USSR to single-handedly suffer such high casualties capturing it? After all, he'd spent much of the war prior to D-Day haranguing his allies for not dying enough while Soviet was being bled white. Surely now was the time for them to make up for that in this common crusade against fascism? Militarily it would have made more sense too – a ready-made pincer movement that would save one side from having to surround the city on its own.

The answers to these fascinating questions lie in what would appear to be a giant game of chess that was being played out between Churchill and Stalin, only with real-life pawns and potentially catastrophic consequences on the world stage.

At the start of April, Churchill, fixing his gaze well beyond Hitler's imminent demise, ordered the drafting of Operation Unthinkable. Documents declassified in 1998 reveal that a month before the end of hostilities in Europe, Churchill was plotting a war against the Soviet Union.

In his explosive secret plan, 47 British and US divisions were to launch a surprise attack against the Soviets on 1 July 1945. Moreover, this offensive was to be supported by ten German divisions, with the intent not merely of driving the Soviets out of Eastern Europe, but of invading the USSR itself. According to official documents, the aim was to seize "such vast areas of Metropolitan Russia that the war-making capacity of that country would be [rendered] impossible."

Did Stalin know what Churchill was up to? Almost certainly. By 1945, the Soviets had so successfully infiltrated British intelligence that notorious double agents like Kim Philby and Guy Burgess had been feeding the Kremlin secrets for years. It also explains Stalin's desire to flood Berlin and its surrounding area with his troops. Control Berlin, as Karl Marx once pointed out, and you



## COUNTDOWN TO THE END

A BLOW-BY-BLOW ACCOUNT OF HOW THE RED ARMY DRAGGED HITLER'S THIRD REICH TO THE EXECUTION BLOCK AND FINALLY KILLED IT OFF

16 APRIL, 3AM

### THE BATTLE OF BERLIN BEGINS

The Red Army begins its assault on the German army's last major defensive line at Seelow Heights, 37 miles west of Berlin. It falls three days later.

20 APRIL, 8PM

### BOMBARDMENT OF BERLIN BEGINS

It's Hitler's 56th birthday. He emerges from the Führerbunker for the last time to award medals to boy soldiers. On the same evening, the Soviet bombardment begins.

21 APRIL, 11AM

### FIRST COUNTER-ATTACK ORDERED

Hitler orders a force under General Felix Steiner to repel the encircling Soviets. When it fails, Hitler announces that he's going to kill himself.

23 APRIL, 2PM

### GENERAL WEIDLING APPOINTED

With the Soviets closing in on all sides, Hitler appoints Artillery General Helmuth Weidling commander of the Berlin Defence Area.

24 APRIL, 10AM

### RETREATING 9TH ARMY SURROUNDED

General Busse's 9th Army, heading to Berlin after withdrawing from Seelow Heights, is encircled at Halbe. Trapped, the Soviets destroy it.

24TH APRIL, 9PM

### SECOND COUNTER-ATTACK

General Wenck's 12th Army is pulled off the line facing US troops and sent to relieve the encircled 9th Army. It proves impossible.



## THE FALL OF THE THIRD REICH



**26 APRIL, DAWN**

**THE ONSLAUGHT ARRIVES**  
About half a million Soviet troops swarm into Berlin from all directions. Fierce street fighting starts to see almost every building damaged or destroyed.



**28 APRIL, 3PM**

**HIMMLER DISCUSSES SURRENDER**  
Hitler learns that his most trusted ally, Himmler, has approached the Western Allies to discuss peace terms. Hitler declares him a traitor.

**29 APRIL, 5PM**

**MOLTKE BRIDGE IS CAPTURED**  
Demolition charges fail to properly destroy the last bridge over the Spree. It falls into Soviet hands, taking access to central Berlin with it.

**30 APRIL, 10AM**

**WEIDLING'S LAST REPORT**  
Weidling informs Hitler that the Soviets are just metres from his bunker, that the Reichstag is under fire and that the German ammunition is very nearly exhausted.

**30 APRIL, 3.30PM**

**HITLER'S SUICIDE**  
Hitler kills himself in the Führerbunker by simultaneously biting into a deadly cyanide capsule and shooting himself in the head. His remains are later cremated by his guards.





## DOWNFALL

control Europe. And if you're Joseph Stalin, you also put an awful lot of territory between your borders and any newly drawn battle lines.

Whatever the truth, there's little doubt that Roosevelt's sudden death on 12 April prompted Stalin to finally attack. In Roosevelt he'd had an ally he could trust. His replacement, Harry S. Truman, offered no such assurances and, rather than wait to be stabbed in the back by those who'd soon be his enemy, Stalin acted decisively. The Battle of Berlin began four days later.

In the early hours of 16 April, Soviet propaganda officers announced in German over loud speakers that the assault on Seelow was imminent. The message that drifted across no-man's-land was designed to terrorise the Germans waiting there into putting their hands up. But for troops in those trenches and dugouts, surrender was not an option. The SS men who held guns to their backs made sure of that.

Shortly after this, at 3am, 9,000 guns fired half a million artillery shells into the German line. The bombardment lasted 35 minutes. When it ended, there was a chilling silence. Then the earth began to shake as 3,000 tanks rattled and clanged their way towards the German position, among them tens of thousands of Soviet infantrymen ready for a fight.

The Soviets expected to take Seelow Heights within hours, but its German commander General Gotthard Heinrici had prepared well. Anticipating the bombardment, he'd pulled his troops back for its duration. Casualties had been minimal and they now raced back to their positions. Prior to the assault, he'd also ordered engineers to open a dam on the Oder River, flooding the land the Soviets now struggled to cross as anti-tank fire thundered down on them. The Soviet commander, Marshal Georgy Zhukov, had also made a critical error.

Hoping to dazzle the German defenders, he'd lit his men's advance with 143 high-powered searchlights. His bombardment, however, had created an enormous wall of smoke that their beams couldn't penetrate and instead bounced back from, blinding his own troops and silhouetting them in the glare. The Germans couldn't have hoped for better targets to aim at. By dawn the Soviet advance had stalled.

It would take Zhukov three days to dislodge Heinrici's defenders, and even then only after his great rival Marshal Ivan Konev began to outflank the Germans from the south. The defensive position at Seelow fell on 19 April. About 12,000 of its defenders had been killed, and the rest now fled. It had cost the Soviets more than double that and nearly 750 tanks, but there was now nothing left between them and Stalin's ultimate prize: Berlin.

Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front raced towards the city from the east, and by 20 April was on its outskirts. Zhukov marked what was to be Hitler's final birthday by launching a huge artillery barrage against the city. Cowering in his Führerbunker, Der Führer, by now deranged and deluded, ranted wide-eyed about how the German people had betrayed him. If he was going to die, he shrieked, then they would die with him. The war was lost, and Hitler knew it, but he'd make Berlin's 3 million inhabitants suffer terribly. The following day Zhukov's ground troops began their assault.

To the south, meanwhile, Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front was also making rapid progress. It'd broken into open country and was chasing what was left of the German 9th Army. By now, these German troops, who'd fought so bravely at Seelow, were slowly being encircled. They fled towards Berlin, where there was still an opening in the front, but on 24 April they were halted at the town of Halbe. Not by Soviets, however, but by SS troops holding the line there.

Mistaking the approaching Germans for a Soviet column, the SS opened up on them. The men from the 9th scurried for cover, and by the time the SS realised their mistake, Konev's troops were swarming all over them, assaulting the SS defences. The 9th were trapped between the two sides, and when fighting eased six days later, 60,000 Germans lay dead, some by the hands of the comrades they were supposed to defend.

The rest of the 1st Ukrainian Front swept forward, driving relentlessly towards Berlin. By nightfall it had made contact with Zhukov's troops west of the capital. With the 2nd Belorussian Front hemming the city in from the north, Berlin was now surrounded.

Hitler attempted a counter-offensive. He ordered the German 12th Army facing US troops in the west to smash through the Russian lines, link with the beleaguered 9th and drive northward to Berlin. It was a wild gamble that had no chance of success. Halted 20 miles from the city, the 12th was soon sent reeling backwards by overwhelming Soviet firepower.

**Far right Soviet troops proved they were there by tagging the Reichstag walls. Some of their graffiti is still visible today**

**With nobody to bury the dead, corpses crowded the streets. About 400,000 people died during fighting in the city alone**





## THE FALL OF THE THIRD REICH



The Soviets now tightened the noose, and the siege that would engulf the city for the next two weeks reduced the once splendid capital to the inner circle of hell. The air became poisoned with the stench of burning buildings and rotting flesh, the streets busy with twisted corpses, the cellars and subways filled with untreated wounded. As the food ran out and the water supply dwindled, those in uniform ran amok.

The civilian population was terrorised by both the Soviets - who hunted in packs for the city's females, raping whoever they found regardless of age or medical condition - and those supposedly defending them. By now the mask of respectability had slipped from the faces of those who wore the swastika, the Death's Head or SS lightning bolt badges. The slaving faces of the monsters beneath were revealed as they roamed the city in gangs murdering anyone they deemed cowardly or defeatist. The corpses of old men and children alike swung creaking from the city's scorched lampposts and trees.

A doomed last stand was prepared. General Helmuth Weidling, the man to whom Hitler had given the impossible task of defending the Nazi capital, established a defensive perimeter around the city centre. His 85,000-strong force, made up of literally the last men (and boys) standing now, faced an onslaught from 500,000 Soviet troops.

In the early hours of 26 April, the final battle began. The streets quaked and crumbled as Soviet armour rumbled through them, while artillery and aircraft rained down fire from above. Every street was contested by infantry, with much of the fighting conducted house-to-house and hand-to-hand. By 28 April, Tempelhof Airport was in Soviet hands. There was now no way

out, and the German lines were collapsing fast. The following evening, Soviet troops captured the Moltke Bridge over the River Spree, giving them direct access to the Nazi heart. Within hours they'd captured Gestapo headquarters. They were now less than a mile from the Reichstag and just 700 metres from Hitler's bunker. The brutal end was, now, inevitable.

Weidling delivered the news to Hitler on the morning of 30 April, also informing him that his garrison only had enough ammunition to last 24 hours. He begged Der Führer to allow him to attempt a breakout, but there was to be no escape. Hitler dismissed Weidling's request and later that afternoon blew his own brains out.

Whether or not this news would have persuaded the diehard Nazis defending the Reichstag to surrender is doubtful. What isn't, though, is that many of the men the Soviets exterminated as they fought their way to the top of the building weren't German. The voices the Soviets heard echoing along the burning corridors, in smoke-choked offices, and even in the grand auditorium were French, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch and Latvian - members of the SS's various foreign legions, dying in the German capital while fighting for their twisted ideology.

By 10.40pm that night, the swastika had been taken down from the roof of the Reichstag and replaced with the red flag of Soviet communism. The symbol of one defunct political ideology was replaced by that of what would eventually be another. The Battle of Berlin may have helped end World War II, but it also marked the start of a new global conflict, one that would last for the next 45 years and stretch around the world. For it was in the rubble of the Reichstag that the next global ideological conflict - the Cold War - was born.

## SURRENDER AND PEACE

After triggering the most devastating war in history, Germany finally signed a peace deal with the Allies

Although Weidling surrendered Berlin to the Soviets on 2 May, effectively ending hostilities, Germany's official surrender didn't take place until six days later, on 8 May 1945, at a ceremony in the Soviet Military Administration in Berlin-Karlshorst.

This was actually the second act of surrender the German authorities signed. The first at the Western Allies' HQ in France the day before was deemed unacceptable to the Soviets, who argued that the surrender should take place at the seat of the German government. The terms of both documents, however, were the same - the surrender was to be unconditional, although Germany could expect to be treated a lot better than she had been in 1918.

Various German leaders, Himmler included, had earlier made several attempts to surrender conditionally to the Western Allies. But the condition was always the same - that the regime be allowed to continue its fight against the Soviet Union. To his credit Eisenhower refused to accept any of them. Like Roosevelt, he was a man of his word and he insisted Germany surrender to all the Allies - the USSR included - so that the war that had ravaged Europe for six long years could finally be brought to a close.







# THE EASTERN FRONT IN NUMBERS



**150,000**

SOVIET SOLDIERS KILLED IN THE FIRST  
WEEK OF OPERATION BARBAROSSA

**2,000**



SOVIET PLANES DESTROYED IN THE FIRST  
TWO DAYS OF THE GERMAN INVASION

**100,000**

CASES OF FROSTBITE  
REPORTED AMONG  
WEHRMACHT SOLDIERS  
BY THE END OF 1941



**3.8 MILLION**

TROOPS UNLEASHED  
BY GERMANY AT THE START  
OF OPERATION BARBAROSSA



**9**

**MILLION**

CHILDREN KILLED DURING THE  
WAR ON THE EASTERN FRONT



**1/10**

AMOUNT OF SOVIET TERRITORY INVADED

**27**

**MILLION**

SOVIET DEATHS DURING WWII



**34.5  
MILLION**



SOLDIERS SERVED IN THE  
RED ARMY DURING WWII



**3,000**

TANKS UNLEASHED BY GERMANY AT  
THE START OF OPERATION BARBAROSSA



**80%**

OF ALL GERMAN LOSSES DURING WWII  
OCCURRED ON THE EASTERN FRONT

**1 MILLION +**



LIVES LOST DURING THE BATTLE OF STALINGRAD





# STORY OF THE EASTERN FRONT



**OPERATION BARBAROSSA**  
DISCOVER THE FULL SCALE OF HITLER'S  
AMBITIOUS ATTEMPT TO INVADE THE USSR



**GENOCIDE**  
EXPLORE THE HORRORS OF THE NAZI  
DRIVE TO ETHNICALLY CLEANSE THE EAST



**INTERVIEW WITH A SOVIET SNIPER**  
MEET A FEMALE SHARPSHOOTER  
WHO SERVED IN THE RED ARMY



**TIGER VS T-34**  
CLIMB INSIDE THE TWO MOST FORMIDABLE  
TANKS OF WORLD WAR II